DECONSTRUCTING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS PROVISION: THE NORMATIVE AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE

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Abstract

Critical thinking skills are at the core of Higher Education and EAP practice; however, there is little consensus in defining the term and its elusive nature. We approached this landscape from a social-constructivist perspective aiming at deconstructing views and practices as well as generating ideas and alternative avenues for research and practice. We conducted a small-scale survey on how EAP practitioners view the relevant provision at their institutions, how they think teaching critical thinking skills can be more focused and effective, and how they view their role in this transition. We used this data as a springboard for our workshop at BALEAP 2023 Conference to initiate a cycle of de- and re-construction of EAP practice. This reflective report adopts Kolb's cycle of reflective practice to analyse the outcomes of this process. Our results indicate that the emerging themes link under two larger concepts: instructional approaches and acknowledging cultural diversity. We identified a positive move towards more holistic, post-method instructional approaches to meet learners' needs without losing sight of active student engagement. The results also highlight that diverse views and perceptions of CT skills due to cultural and educational differences were acknowledged and deficit models and/or stereotyping were rejected and identified as main challenges EAP tutors face in their practice.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, EAP, Deconstruction, Reflection, Cultural Differences

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking skills development is at the core of not only university studies but also information management and global citizenship. It is widely agreed that developing an inquisitive mind that embraces lateral

thinking informed by evidence and reflection is valuable at all levels of study, professional and social life. However, this is where the agreement ends. The nature of the term itself and what it means in diverse sociocultural contexts as well as whether and how such skills can be taught and by whom are issues at the heart of current debate. In this context, the work of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners involves not only teaching the language of criticality but also helping students develop a critical disposition. In our workshop at the BALEAP Biennial Conference 2023, we approached this landscape from a social-constructivist perspective and aimed at building upon a shared knowledge bank and a collaborative, thinking-outside-the-box space to deconstruct and reflect upon our practice (the normative) and re-construct by bringing in new directions, approaches and pedagogies, and innovative practice (the transformative). The aim of this reflective report is to systematically analyse our experience and outcomes from our workshop and further encourage a sustained dialogue on the nature and future of critical thinking skills provision and pedagogies in our discipline and beyond. Before entering this reflective cycle, we will briefly consider the dominant philosophical approaches and definitions of critical thinking skills in general and in HE focusing only on work that is most relevant to current EAP practices and our deconstruction purposes, while philosophical and cultural skepticism will emerge as an integral part of the re-construction process.

THE CONCEPT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: DEFINITION AND RELEVANT RESEARCH

The concept of Critical Thinking (CT) has a long history, with roots in the Socratic method of questioning and challenging assumptions. American philosopher John Dewey formally introduced the term 'Critical Thinking' in the early 20th century, emphasizing its role in reasoning, inquiry, and problem-solving. While the importance of critical thinking in higher education has been widely acknowledged in Western academia since the 1970s, Asian countries have more recently adopted this dominant view and student-centred approaches to cultivate CT skills (Wang & Seepho, 2017; Sun, 2019; Van & My, 2019; Du & Zhang 2022). Despite this global recognition, there remains a lack of consensus on the precise definition of CT, particularly regarding its components and whether it encompasses specific skills or broader dispositional tendencies. One of the reasons is because there is an abundance of definitions.

Definitions of CT in general are based on assumptions that it is a unitary skill applicable to any domain of knowledge or argument and involves a

set of high-order or advanced thinking skills, such as such as analysis, evaluation, and inference (Bloom, 1956; Norris, 1985; Bensley, 1998; Dale, 1991; Elder & Paul, 1994; Halpern, 1998; Pithers & Soden, 2000; Cheung *et al*., 2002; Diestler, 2011). Other researchers challenged these general and broad accounts of critical thinking and claim that critical thinking includes both dispositions and skills (Ennis 1987; McPeck, 1990). Critical thinking dispositions include truth-seeking, open-mindedness, systematicity, analyticity, maturity, inquisitiveness, and self-confidence (Facione et al., 1994). McPeck (1990) argues that broad definitions fail to recognise that critical thinking is not a single set of skills, but rather it often depends on the discipline one is studying. This challenges the validity and usefulness of various tests and programmes that aim to measure or improve CT skills, which indicates critical thinking is not a general skill that can be taught or tested in isolation, but rather a context-dependent activity that requires reflective skepticism and suspension of assent. This is further supported by Moore (2013), who claims that different disciplines have their own criteria for what constitutes critical thinking. However, these approaches to CT diverge from Ennis (2015, p32), who defines critical thinking skills as '…reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do' or Vardi's (2013, p1) definition as '… a process of reasoning aimed at coming to a sound, justifiable decision, conclusion or judgement'. The latter two definitions appear to align with the overall goals of UK Higher Education.

Research on what CT is and how it is perceived and taught in Western Higher Education (HE) focuses on philosophical, instructors', and students' perceptions. A consensus definition of CT skills has been proposed by a cross-disciplinary panel of experts led by psychologist Peter Facione (1990): 'purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based' (p. 2). This definition appears to capture the perceptions of instructors in HE settings. For example, Shaheen (2016) conducted a qualitative study with a sample of 14 British lecturers in a UK higher institution to gain understanding of instructors' perception of critical thinking. The findings revealed that CT is perceived as an ability to analyse a text and engage in critical reflection. The nature of CT, in the instructors' responses, seems to include intellectual engagement, questioning habits, challenging thoughts and assumptions, evaluation of the arguments and assessing claims. Also, Bellaera et al. (2021) found that there is broad consensus on prioritising CT skills across Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). The team sampled from HSS faculties in 176 US and UK HE institutions asking

instructors to prioritise CT skills in order of importance using Facione's (1990) definition. Their analysis showed similar results across faculties in the two countries of instruction, which implies that similar approaches can be used to teach CT skills across HSS. Instructors also opted for more indirect teaching methods, implicitly developing CT through prompting and dialogue-based approaches.

The definitions mentioned above are mainly from Western academics' perspective. In this context, students and academics often have different understandings of CT, with students focusing on the product (e.g., an essay or presentation) and academics focusing on the process (e.g., the thinking skills and strategies used to produce the product) (Lloyd & Bahr, 2010). Fakunle et al. (2016) reported that students struggled to grasp the concept and importance of CT and they believed that deep learning is required for CT. Lucas (2019) explored how CT was connected to innovative thinking, independent thinking, and a questioning attitude, which were more related to dispositions than skills and abilities. Along the same lines, Lucas (2019) identified some challenges for developing CT, such as lacking background knowledge and experiencing differences in educational systems. Fakunle et al. (2016) also suggested that a positive or negative event, such as course feedback, could trigger the development of CT skill because it could motivate students to reflect on their learning process and outcomes, and to seek improvement or confirmation.

However, the perception of critical thinking as a solely Western concept is misguided; critical thinking has been present in various civilizations throughout history and is not exclusive to Western cultures. Critical thinking is culturally contextualized, with socio-cultural obligations, norms, and values playing a significant role in shaping individuals' critical thinking strategies and how these manifest in and outside academia: some cultures value silence and harmony in discussions, while others prioritize heated debates and argumentation (Ennis, 1998; Nisbett et al, 2001; Lun et al, 2010; Rear, 2017; Qasserras & Qasserras, 2023). Facione's work also refers to CT skills related to both cognitive as well as affective and ethical dispositions, which depend on the thinkers' 'metaphysical, epistemological, political, cultural or religious view of the world' (1990, p. 26). An indicative example of diverse, yet equally critical, ways of thinking is that of analytical vs dialectical thinking processes and the world views they represent. Western thinking patterns are more analytical, which means concepts are divided into distinctive components and then scrutinised, while Asians tend to notice more changes, tolerate contradictions and see greater interrelatedness (Peng & Nisbet, 1999; Peng & Nisbet, 2000; Nisbett et al, 2001). This challenges the misconception (or rather cultural bias) that non-Western students lack CT

skills as affective and ethical dispositions are highly socially and ideologically conditioned.

The definitions and perceptions discussed offer an appropriate theoretical framework for our research purposes and the deconstruction process we planned for the BALEAP conference workshop. We adopted Facione's (1990) definition since we aim to replicate Bellaera's et al (2021) CT skills prioritisation, expanding the sample by including the EAP community and Science Faculties at the University of Northampton. By bringing together the EAP community views with Bellaera et al (2021) and our own findings from students at the University of Northampton we hope to identify areas of diverge or converge and further inform the re-construction process and relevant pedagogies.

CT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND EAP

Critical thinking has become increasingly important in university education leading to a major shift in the way that EAP is taught. Atkinson (1997) argued that critical thinking, which was previously only taught in L1 education contexts, should also be taught within 'the realm of TESOL'. Today, over 30 years later, critical thinking is seen as an essential part of any EAP program (Moore, 2019) and is the sixth competency in BALEAP's TEAP Competency Framework, which states that an EAP teacher will 'understand the role of critical thinking in academic contexts and will employ tasks, processes and interactions that require students to demonstrate critical thinking skills' (BALEAP, 2008, p. 6).

The main aim of EAP courses is to help students develop the language and academic skills they need to study or conduct research in English, for example, to study in English-medium universities. An EAP course can focus on different aspects of academic communication, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking. This means that critical thinking in EAP is realised in two ways: thinking *about* the language (analysing how English is used to express ideas); and thinking *through* the language (participating actively in using the language to explore and present ideas and arguments) (Wilson, 2019, p2). This indicates the development of target language and critical thinking is inseparable. Moore (2019) proposed a working definition of CT skills in EAP, considering 'critical thinking as the ability to analyse, synthesise, interpret and evaluate ideas, information, situations and texts' (p2). The aim of proposing this definition is to guide EAP practitioners in integrating critical thinking into programs and helping students develop these skills.

General approach	to teach CT separately from subject matter learning. CT skills and dispositions are the teaching objectives instead of the subject's contents
Infusion approach	to teach CT as an explicit goal within subject matter teaching
Immersion approach	to teach CT as an implicit goal within subject matter teaching
Mixed approach	to teach CT as a separate goal parallel with the subject matter teaching
Holistic approach	to teach CT in students' all-inclusive subjects for the degree programmes

Table 1: summary of CT teaching approaches based on Niu et al. (2013)

Clarity in definitions is important for EAP practitioners to enable informed decisions as there are diverse views on instructional approaches. There appears to be disagreement about whether critical thinking can be taught through specific subjects or as a separate subject on its own, with many researchers claiming that critical thinking can only be mastered when it is taught within a particular subject area (Lai, 2011; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). In a meta-analysis on priorities and teaching practices in HE, Niu et al (2013) offer a comprehensive summary of five teaching approaches to teaching critical thinking skills based on Ennis's (1989) typology of instructional approaches (table 1). The Infusion approach is similar to the Immersion approach in that both embed CT within specific subjects. However, the Infusion approach explicitly states CT skills as teaching objectives, while the Immersion approach does not. According to Abrami et al. (2008) and Cheng and Wan (2017), the Infusion approach is more effective than the Immersion approach for developing CT skills. This is because, in this approach, CT skills are gradually integrated into the curriculum and are taught within the context of specific subjects. In addition, students consistently practise CT skills to reinforce learning and demonstrate their skills in authentic assessment to reflect real-world applications.

The concept of critical thinking and its definitions are complex and multifaceted. Although conceptions of critical thinking are essential, as they guide teaching and have different emphases, depths, and details, there is no single definition or approach that is universally accepted or superior to the others. It appears that EAP conceptions of critical thinking in principle align with Facione (1990) and the dominant view in UK HE settings.

A REFLECTIVE REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP: DECONSTRUCTING OUR EXPERIENCE

The main aim of our workshop design was to deconstruct the concept and practices of CT in HE as we experience it as EAP practitioners. The workshop yielded a wealth of qualitative data, including not only the ideas noted on post-it notes, but also the vivid discussions within and amongst the groups, with exchange of experience and ideas across the room. We intentionally did not participate in the group discussions during the workshop, keeping a non-participant observer distance. This enables us to report not only a summary of themes emerging from the data collected but also a different experiential account from that of our colleagues who were actively involved in the workshop.

Our presentation and discussion of results for this report will follow Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice (Kolb, 1984). In this model, generating knowledge involves analysing and transforming practices and experiences in four dialectically related modes that capture deep understanding, conceptualisation and transformative action: two interconnected modes for understanding experiences, namely Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualism (AC), as well as two interrelated modes for changing experiences, which are Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) (Fig. 1). We selected this model because we perceive this report as our contribution to the process of co-constructing knowledge during (and we hope after) the BALEAP Conference. We consider all data that was disseminated and co-constructed during the workshop as 'Concrete Experience' that we share with our colleagues who were present in that process. This experience is contextually rich, with our professional context and practices being at the fore of the whole process of de- and co-construction. We also believe that our reflective report will be incomplete without active, reflective, and critical involvement of the readers, who will hopefully also be involved in Active Experimentation to complete the cycle and feed back to the EAP community.

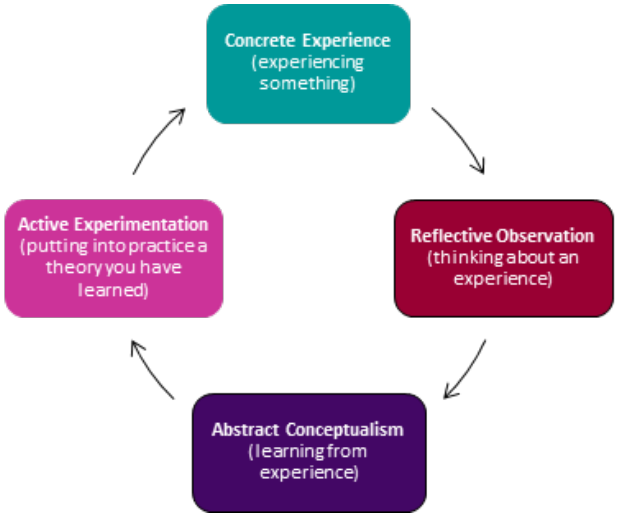

Figure 1: Model of Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice. Source: University of Hull Library

METHODOLOGY

Our methodological choices are rooted in Pragmatism as an epistemological framework, which offers methodological and philosophical flexibility: theories are viewed instrumentally, with Praxis at the heart of the inquiry (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori et al., 2021) and Transferability of knowledge to different contexts as a key precept (Morgan, 2007). A pragmatic approach offers grounds for translating knowledge into transformative action. These concepts are key to the aims of our workshop (and the larger research project it is part of) and, fundamentally, to the process of de-construction, which was the main theme of the BALEAP Conference.

We employed a Mixed Methods (MM) approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research aims and questions. Grounded in Pragmatism, MM approach aims to leverage the strengths of both positivist and constructivist paradigms (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Creswell et al, 2003). Following Creswell's et al. (2003) typology, we adopted a Sequential Transformative Design, with two distinct data collection phases, giving priority to the qualitative phase, that is, the data collected at the BALEAP Conference workshop, while the data from the quantitative phase that preceded it were predominantly used as a springboard for discussion. Transformative design research is guided by a theoretical perspective or framework and aims at giving voice to participants and promoting change. A social-constructivist framework is the theoretical lens that informed the purpose, questions and interpretation of data in our study. In terms of data integration, we adopted Plano Clark's (2019) suggestion for clearly

mapping the stages and interface points on procedural diagrams, considering why, what, when and how data is integrated. In our design data underwent two phases of interpretation: the quantitative data was first interpreted by us and presented to colleagues at the workshop. This is the first point of interface: colleagues further interpreted and used this data to inform their discussions. The second point of interface is our integration and interpretation of both strands of data for this report (Fig. 1).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection pertaining to this report involved two distinct, consecutive stages. Stage 1 included the quantitative strand of our research:

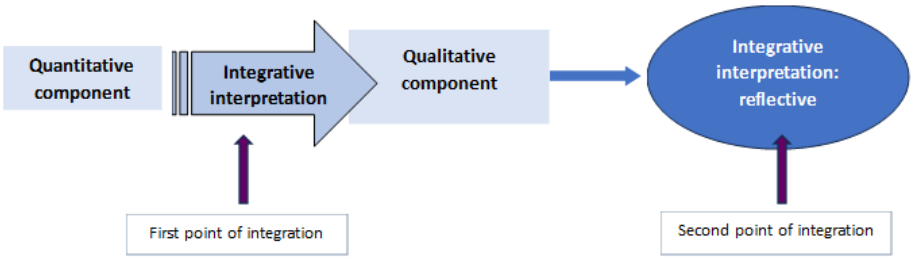

Figure 2: Procedural diagram mapping points of integration

- *Questionnaire for EAP Practitioners*: Distributed to colleagues at various UK HE institutions via purposive sampling. It included two sections: demographic information and CT skills provision, providing information to help us build an indicative map of current CT skills provision in the sector, and questions covering CT skills ranking, teaching aims, methods, and professional development needs to compare EAP views with Bellaera et al (2021) research on HSS lecturers.
- *Questionnaire for Students*: Piloted at the University of Northampton (UON) via purposive sampling to MA TESOL and BA Top-up students. Focusing on student views on CT skills and challenges. Questions included open questions on student definitions of CT skills and challenges they face, as well as Likert scales and rating questions on understanding, confidence, and prioritization of CT skills.

Both questionnaires were distributed via Jisc Online Surveys and all responses were anonymised on submission.

Stage 2 involved the qualitative strand, that is, the workshop discussions at the BALEAP conference. Attendees worked in self-selected groups of 4-6 throughout the workshop, which included a short presentation of our results followed by a two-step process:

- evaluating current CT provision, focusing on effective practices and challenges
- discussing new ideas, innovative practices, new directions in approaches and pedagogies and areas for further research

Amidst these two steps, there was a 'Bin it!' task, where colleagues had to throw in the bin the one idea or practice they would definitely exclude when re-constructing teaching CT skills in the next stage. The project received ethical approval (ETH2223-0060). by the Library, Learning and Student Services (LLSS) Ethics Committee, while oral consent to summarise the workshop data was obtained for stage 2 in line with the University of Northampton Research Ethics Code and Procedures. Stage 2 was not intended to be part of a strictly planned research project, neither did we wish to risk restricting this open, de-constructive process within a supportive, professional environment by interfering with our own research aims. This decision has led us to depart from the raw data and explore alternative avenues of approaching the wealth of information that the workshop yielded, as described below.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Descriptive analysis was used to give an overview of the quantitative strand results due to the small sample size, which, nevertheless, is big enough to show trends. For the questionnaire distributed to EAP practitioners, the variables we focused on were the types of CT skills provision in UK HE institutions, CT skills ranking and CT skills teaching practices. CT skills provision was further analysed by dividing the sample into Russell Group and 'Other' universities. Our rationale for this lies in the substantial differences between this group (and generally 'Old Universities') and the rest of the HE institutions not only in terms of size and student numbers but mainly in terms of affordances that stem from strong branding and inherent divisions between 'old' and 'new' that influence, amongst other factors, economic and research resources (Furey, et al., 2014; Boliver, 2015). These, in turn, determine the funds and staff allocated to create and deliver on- and off-line resources. We did not have adequate responses to the questionnaire distributed to

University of Northampton students to present reliable quantitative analysis.

The qualitative strand data included comments from the open-ended questions in students' questionnaires as well as data collected at the BALEAP Conference workshop. We employed inductive thematic analysis, that is, approaching the data without predetermined thematic frameworks during the initial coding and then create conceptual clusters or themes, which can constitute an argument since they capture meaning across codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is these conceptual clusters we will be summarising and reflecting upon in this report.

FINDINGS: CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

Stage 1 findings: quantitative data

The questionnaire for EAP practitioners was distributed to 15 UK HE institutions via purposive sampling techniques. We received responses from at least 11 universities – 'at least' because 10 colleagues chose not to respond to this question or used general terms such as 'employed' or 'lecturer'. Overall, we received 30 responses (N=30), which is a small sample for inferential analysis, yet large enough to show trends.

Descriptive analysis was used to give an overview of the trends in current CT skills provision across the sector. As shown in figure 3, most universities in our sample opt for online self-study general CT skills materials (21 responses, 70%) and general CT skills in taught in EAP courses (26 responses, 86.67%). CT skills taught by subject lecturers (13 responses, 43.33%) and CT workshops by Learning Developers (12 responses, 40%) were also popular. Discipline-specific online materials and workshops were less popular (23.33% and 30% respectively). 8 respondents (26.67%) were not sure and 1 (3.33%) stated that there may be provision through other departments in the disciplines.

To control for Russell Group institutions, we removed the 10 responses that did not report any affiliation, so the sample became even smaller: N (RussellG)= 8 and N(other)= 10. We used probability of occurrence which considers the relevant contribution to the sample and can indicate trends despite small sample size. The trends are similar between the two groups (Fig. 4) except for 3 variables: there was 47% probability of CT skills taught by subject lecturers in Russell Group universities compared to 63% probability in the rest of the sector; there were more probabilities for CT workshops by Learning Developers (63%) in a Russell Group institution compared to 42% in any other; and only Russell Group institutions offer discipline-specific online self-study materials, with 47%

probability of occurrence. This last trend is important as it infers to funds and expertise to organise and maintain such learning spaces.

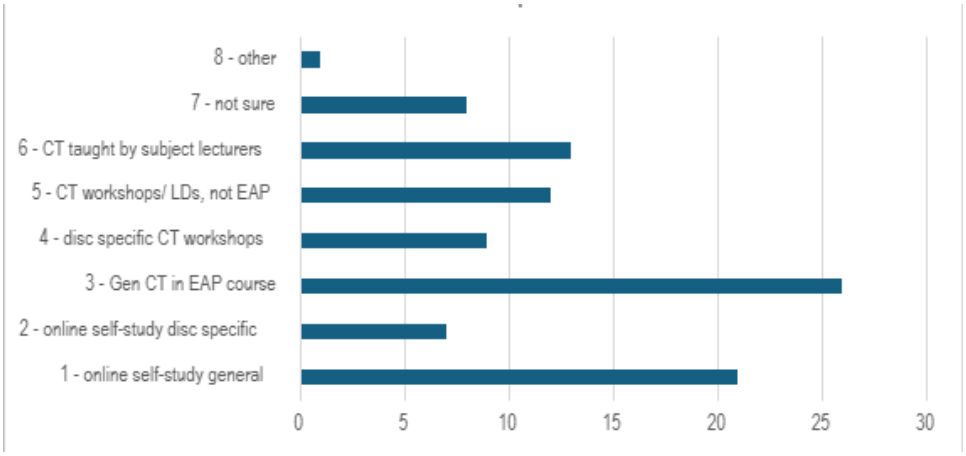

Figure 3: trends in CT skills provision in UK HE

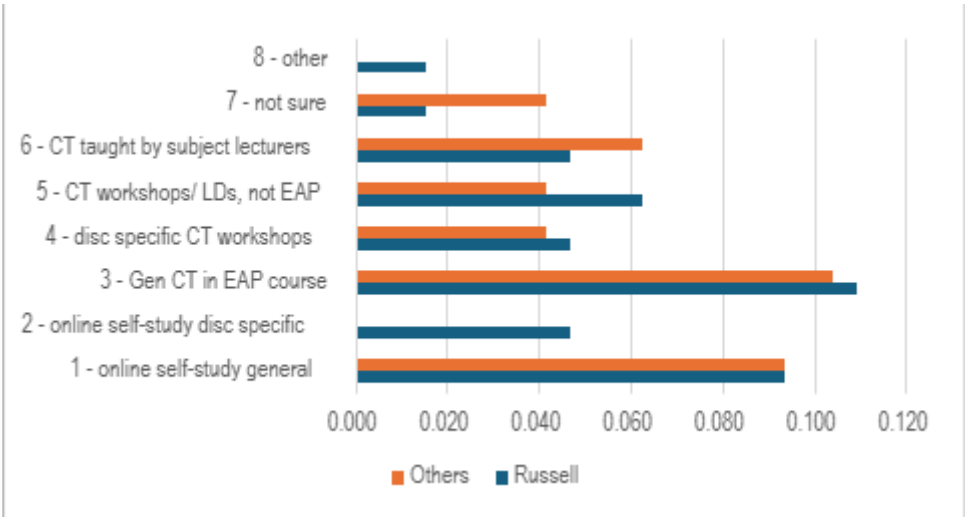

Figure 4: trends in CT skills provision controlling for Russell Group institutions

We were also interested to see if prioritisation of CT skills shows similarities to that of lecturers in Humanities and Social Sciences in Bellaera et al (2021) research. We received a low number of valid responses (N=14), mainly because order of importance was misinterpreted and in some cases values 1-10 were assigned instead. Figures 5 and 6 below show the trends between the two samples *only* for positions 1 and 10 (our highlighting of mid-points). In their research, Bellaera et al (2021) found evidence of consensus in which skills lecturers

prioritised in their disciplines, with analysis, evaluation and interpretation considered the most important for teaching. There was little overlap in the ranking of CT skills in positions 1 and 10 - if most instructors ranked a skill as number 1 then very few instructors would rank the same skill as number 10 and vice versa. Explanation, inference, and inductive reasoning are neither rated as most or least important and explanation appears to be the middle-ranked skill. Our results indicate some overlap in ranking in position 1, for example, there were colleagues who ranked Creativity in the 1st and the 10th position. There was no overlap in position 10, that is, Description was ranked as least important across the sample (Fig. 5). Explanation, inference, analysis, problem solving, and inductive reasoning were ranked as neither least nor most important, showing a similar trend to Bellaera et al (2021) for explanation, inference and inductive reasoning.

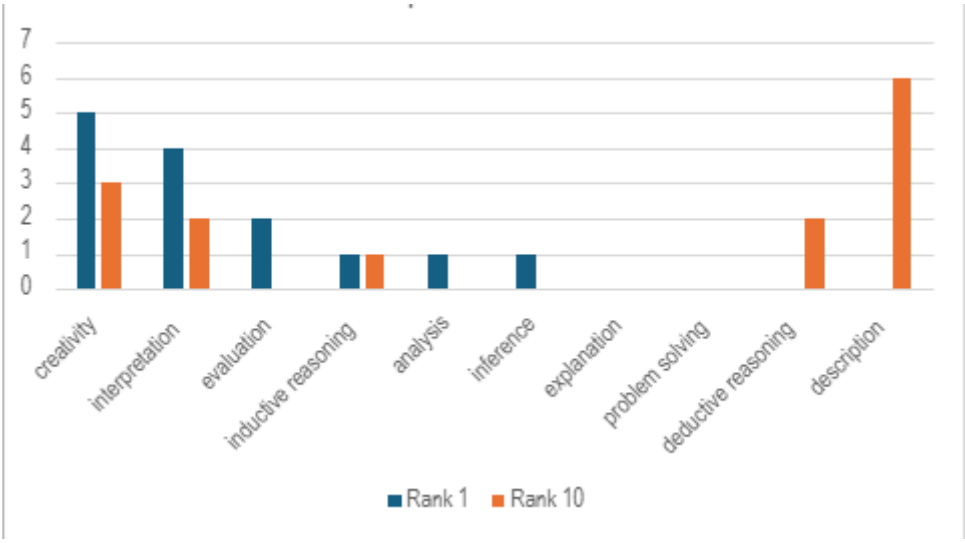

Figure 5: CT skills prioritization for EAP staff

However, this comparison is only indicative and by no means generalisable as the sample is very small – a few more valid responses could have skewed the trends significantly. Neither can we assume that EAP practitioners do not value analysis and problem-solving as valuable CT skills because of their middle-grounds position as shown in Fig. 5 as these figures show the relevant choices for positions 1 and 10 *only* and not the other positions on the scale. What we can assume with caution is that some consensus is likely to occur in the middle-grounds and for Description and Deductive Reasoning in position 10.

Regarding which type of instruction EAP practitioners think is more effective for teaching CT skills (Fig. 6), the trends show that there is little

difference in preferences between discipline-specific workshops (8 responses, 26.67%), general CT skills (7 responses, 23.33%) and CT skills taught by subject tutors (7 responses, 23.33%). 'Other' category (2 responses, 6.67%) included Conversation and the types of questions we ask as well as dependence on 'students' skills, abilities and CT dispositions'. An important finding is the position of online self-study materials as the least effective type of instruction (1 response, 3.33%), given the high position in CT current provision (70%, Fig. 3). This area calls for more research as online self-study appears to be gaining momentum in most areas study skills training.

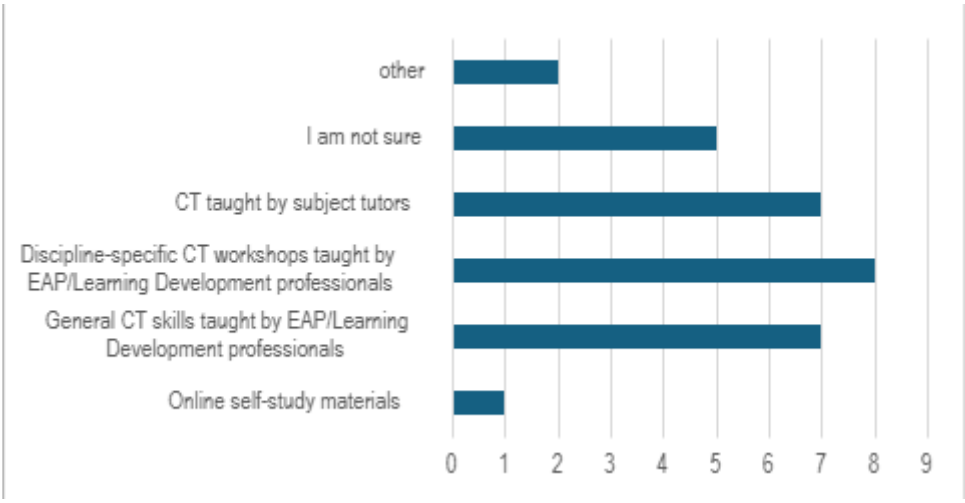

Figure 6: most effective CT type of instruction

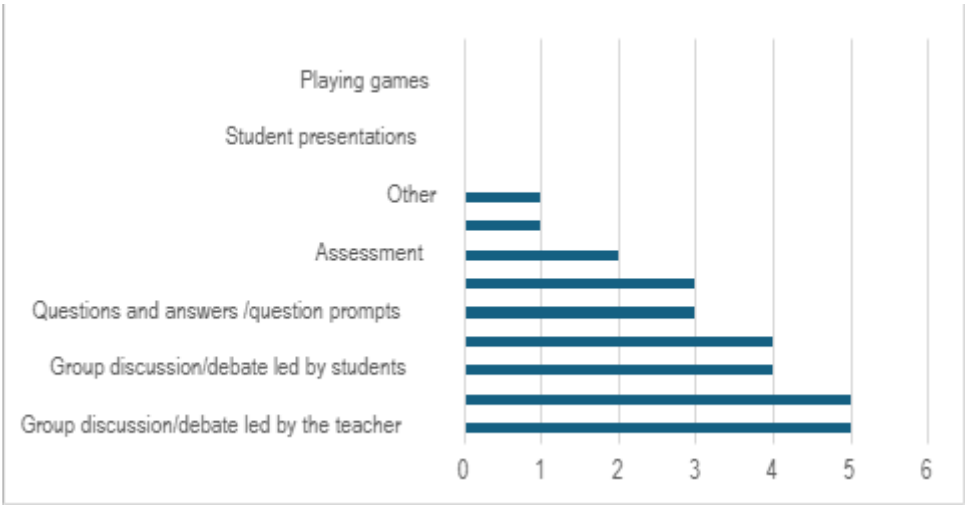

Figure 7: most effective CT teaching techniques

Finally, the most effective CT teaching techniques appear to be the ones that involve discussions and reflection. More specifically, as shown in figure 7, student reflection and group discussions/debates led by the teacher are most preferred with 5 responses each (16.67%) respectively, followed by group discussions/debates led by the students and practice (4 responses each, 13.33%) and problem-solving tasks and question prompts (3 responses each, 10%). It is interesting that feedback, mind maps, games, case studies/role play, and quizzes are not considered effective at all despite being quite popular tools for online self-study materials. Responses under 'other' included finding examples of CT in texts.

Stage 1 findings: qualitative data

This is a report of our findings from the open questions that were included in the questionnaire we distributed to UON students. There were two open questions that were central to this inquiry. The first one was '*What does CT mean to you? Can you briefly define it?*' Student responses included clear, rational / logical and independent thinking, objective analysis, and understanding and evaluation of ideas. They also identified CT skills as thinking 'from different perspectives' (S4), which shows awareness of the need to identify, understand and evaluate different positions in their disciplines:

I think it's that you can see things from a different perspective and can identify both sides of things (S2)

Critical Thinking means having the ability and skill to analyse and think logically, especially from a different perspective. (S3)

An interesting alternative offered by S6: 'It represents the combination of education, experience, and research.' Experiential knowledge is regarded as important as education and research.

The second open question was about the challenges students face: '*Which area(s) would you identify as the most challenging for applying Critical Thinking skills?*' Students reported challenges related to identifying, understanding and evaluating arguments, making logical assumptions and assessing validity of assumptions. We noted that all student responses included logic and assessment / evaluation of arguments. Only one student mentioned language for CT as a challenge. One other respondent offered a powerful comment on how, in their view and experience, different cultural perspectives may influence CT skills development:

I think it is something related to my own country/culture and something that goes against my own values/religion/ethical standards. Once I have gone against these things, it is hard for me to justify something in order to balance critical thinking' (S2)

We understand this 'clash' of values as central for student experience, not only for international students who come from different cultures and educational systems but for any student. Differences in value systems do not necessarily imply different locations on the globe, especially in a multicultural society like the UK.

STAGE 2: DECONSTRUCTING CT SKILLS PROVISION

These findings, along with a summary of the quantitative data, were presented to the 54 colleagues who attended the workshop and used as a springboard for discussion. The workshop included 2 steps with the purpose to first de-construct based on collective experience (analysing the normative) and then innovate (set foundations for the transformative). Data was collected on post-it notes at the end of each step – there was a Mentimeter option for step 2, but no comments were posted. The workshop design along with the themes that emerged from the data and the number of comments for each thematic unit are visually presented in figure 8. In this report, we will present summaries for each theme after our interpretation of the data.

The first part of step 1 was purposefully appealing to positive reactions focusing on key success stories that can form a positive basis for discussion. We collected 40 comments which naturally fell into 6 distinct themes, showing there is valuable, positive teaching expertise. Learning by doing and using exemplars were the two most popular themes. Effective practices under *learning by doing* included collaborative approaches, techniques that promote negotiation and de-construction of CT skills to gradually build critical disposition, and academic literacies and genre creation, with emphasis on active student involvement. Practices under *exemplars* ranged from giving examples and models to applying noticing skills in academic work or using Artificial Intelligence for critical and evaluative purposes, while practices under *scaffolding* included providing help with the language of criticality and unpacking CT skills and relevant terminology. *Discipline related* practices underlined the importance of embedding CT skills within the disciplines and collaborating with discipline specialists to develop our epistemological understanding of CT skills in different disciplinary contexts while *managing expectations* related mainly to linking CT to assessments and

marking criteria. *Other* included practices related to empowerment, teachability and transferability of CT skills.

The second part of step 1 focused on the challenges we face when teaching CT skills in the EAP classroom. The groups were once more prolific, offering 40 more comments on problematic practices and approaches. Six themes emerged from this data. Most challenges were *discipline related*, ranging from different epistemological understandings to vague expectations, criteria and feedback, limited collaboration across disciplines and even more limited access to resources such as learning objectives assessment criteria. Comments under *definition / understanding* focused more on the difficulties stemming from the multitude of definitions of CT skills and how these can be misinterpreted by students as only critique.

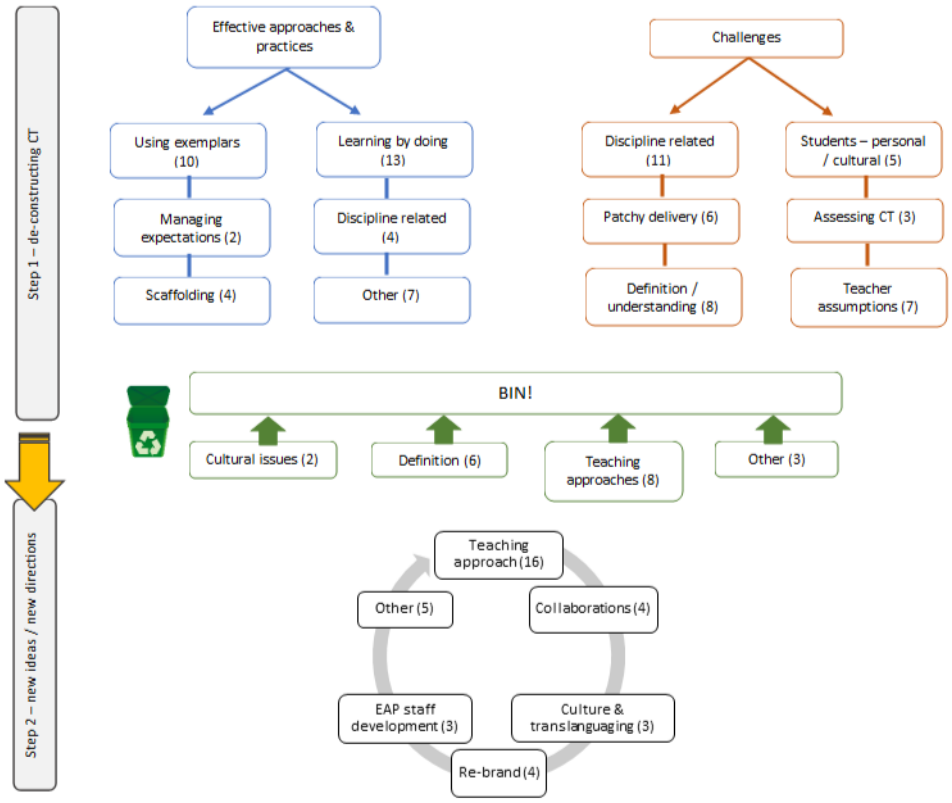

Figure 8: Workshop structure and contributions: initial coding and themes

Teacher assumptions included challenges referring to whether CT skills can be taught, the complexity of this process and what we actually (should) teach, CT or language for CT. The next theme, *patchy delivery*, revealed challenges related to fragmented and inconsistent delivery, one size fits all approaches and de-contextualised, one-off workshops.

Challenges under *students – personal/cultural* refer to cultural bias, which hinders critical thinking, as well as limitations stemming from cultural or educational differences, which restrict skills transference. The final theme emerging from the data was *assessing CT* and mainly involved challenges related to the elusive nature of criticality and our difficulties measuring CT skills development.

'The Bin!' collected 19 comments, 8 of which were on *teaching approach*. It appears that more traditional, formulaic, and artificial approaches that focus on criticism and look for holes in the argument are out of grace. Comments under the next theme, *definitions*, focused on over-simplifications of what CT is and generalisations out of context as well as disposing of the term itself. Comments under *cultural* mainly focused on cultural bias and perceptions of who is capable of CT based on stereotypes while the theme *other* involved lack of collaboration between EAP teachers and disciplines, and obscurities in assessment briefs.

Step 2 of the workshop invited new ideas, innovative practices, new directions, approaches and pedagogies, and areas for further research. There was vivid discussion and the groups offered 35 comments/new ideas. We visualised this stage as a cycle (Fig 8) rather than compartmentalised for two reasons: firstly, the dynamics were different and there was a lot of movement in the room since all teams had to place their ideas on the board. This resulted in cross-group discussions, with comments on what was already posted and feeding back to their team. Secondly, all comments refer to links and connections, collaboration, and co-creating, indicating a process of constructive thinking rather than a collection of isolated ideas. New ideas under *teaching approaches* included creating strong connections to reality and personal experiences, co-creation of materials and student empowerment, more focus on practicing CT and introducing practical strategies than learning about it, visualisation and art as a vehicle for practical application of CT strategies and, in general, combining knowledge and strategies within and across disciplines. Comments under *collaborations* involved establishing good working relations between EAP and subject specialists, co-teaching, and co-creation of assessment rubrics while *culture and translanguaging* referred to exploring different cultural perceptions and translanguaging as a tool for doing so. The need for our own CT skills development and understanding of differences amongst disciplines as well as practicing the relevant skills and strategies was highlighted under *EAP staff development* while r*e-branding* mainly involved ideas related to re-naming CT to avoid misunderstandings. Finally, ideas under *other* contained comments problematising on whether and who should be teaching CT skills, the influence of AI and language correction and other

feedback tools and how CT skills can be assessed, teaching becoming more context-specific, and transparency in marking criteria.

DISCUSSION: REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION AND ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALISM

We experienced the workshop from the periphery, as non-participant observers, which means we had the privilege to be present and observe but not that of contributing to the discussions. The data gives a vivid picture of the progress and direction of discussions but what we gained as observers is a 'bird's eye view' of the discussions held in the room. An immediate reflection as soon as we finished the workshop was that the multitude of definitions and concepts related to CT skills presents us with challenges and further training or even a kind of 'specialisation' on certain disciplines may be one of the ways forward. This raised the logical question of who should teach CT skills and what our place as EAP specialists is in this: to teach or not to teach. Is CT skills an area that is better taught in a discipline-specific environment, by specialists in these fields who can focus on the particular requirements in their disciplines? If so, what about the language of criticality, who teaches that? Can we teach this language devoid of context, and why would we do that? There are excellent online sources that can provide long lists and examples of language use to fill this gap. Our initial reflections appear to be recycling perennial issues in this debate but not probing a way out; however, the data would because it reflects the dynamics developed within and amongst the groups. To avoid recycling the same questions, on reflecting on the themes that emerged from the data we attempted to further link them to larger concepts or debates that are currently live not only within the EAP community but also in the wider academic community. We will focus on two such debates in this reflection because to our perception, most of the discussion during the workshop was pertinent to broader issues, questions and challenges that are posed within the realms of these two debates, namely: instructional approaches and acknowledging cultural diversity in academia.

Approaches to teaching CT skills were essentially at the centre of discussions, with effective teaching practices and new ideas explored mostly including student led discussions, co-creation of meaning and materials, genre creation, and praxis in the centre of the learning process. We think this indicates a healthy evolution of thinking in the learning theory debate that aligns with a transition that has occurred in HE over the last few decades. This shift involves departing from a traditional, deficit model of imparting knowledge and moving towards an

instructional approach that regards learners as active participants in the creation of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Jonassen et al., 1995; Lea, 2005) and places emphasis on the significance of learner interactions and collaborative work (Holtham et al., 2006). From a theory of learning perspective, this change involves moving away from the behaviourist-cognitive debate and adopting a cognitive-constructivist perspective, that is, from an objectivist standpoint on learning to a social constructivist perspective that posits learning is not isolated, meaning and knowledge are socially negotiated and constructed, with learners actively involved in shaping their own worldview (Ertmer & Newby, 1993).

It is important to note here that the wealth of ideas and experiences exchanged may have stemmed from diverse instructional approaches; however, they were appropriated within a more learner-centred, constructivist framework. For instance, exemplars and models, which would point to a 'normative', Swalesian approach were combined with noticing skills, group discussions and co-creation of knowledge. This is a positive move towards more holistic, post-method instructional approaches with educators confidently merging techniques to meet learners' needs without losing sight of active student engagement.

The second concept or debate we would like to focus on is that of acknowledging cultural diversity in academia. Deficit models and/or stereotyping were the challenges we faced and the things we did not want to see in our practice again. In addition, acknowledging there are diverse views and perceptions of CT skills due to cultural and educational differences was at the centre of discussions. Interestingly, the notion of cultural bias was also part of the discussions. This led us ask more questions: to what extent does cultural bias affect our ability to think critically about the world around us? It can lead us to favour information and perspectives that are consistent with our own worldview and ignore diverse cultural manifestations and expressions of critical thinking skills across different societies. Especially with reference to academic performance in English speaking HE settings, there are studies that show there is no significant difference in how students from different cultural backgrounds use critical thinking when required in a course compared to home students (Lun et al, 2010; Rear, 2017). We highlighted two interesting findings: first that dialectical vs analytical thinking styles did not mediate the observed differences in CT skills manifestations, Second that English proficiency, rather than thinking style, plays a significant role in these observed differences, which is also highlighted in Rear (2017) and Qasserras and Qasserras (2010). Apart from challenging common misconceptions, these findings underscore the importance of EAP work

in academia and take us back to the question of language for criticality: who teaches it, in what context, and how.

These concepts were at the heart of another talk at an in-house conference at the University of Northampton (Langford, 2023), where our colleague from the Learning Development team problematised on WEIRD critical thinking. WEIRD refers to Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic societies, a term coined by Henrich et al. (2010) who claim that there is a tendency to generalise social and behavioural research to all humans while the subjects studied were WEIRD undergraduates. Considering global majority, WEIRD people are not a representative sample, neither in terms of numbers, nor in terms of traits – actually the writers report WEIRD populations are outliers. Is there a reasonable and valid case, then, that CT skills and analytical reasoning as conceptualised by dominant trends in academia and academic research are culturally specific, viewed through western tinted glasses, hence alienating a large part of human population and intellectual activity? How much have we lost from excluding anything remotely alternative (for whom?) from our understandings of the world around us and within us?

We understand that by asking these questions, the discussion becomes wider and beyond teaching CT skills in the EAP classroom – or does it? However, we feel we need to open this discussion and invite reflections and ideas that will move our thinking and practice further by making it more open and inclusive.

CONCLUSION: ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

In this reflective report, we discussed our own research findings and a summary of the outcome of the workshop we designed for the BALEAP Biennial Conference 2023. The relevant literature highlights the multitude of epistemological approaches to CT, which result in a range of definitions not only of what CT is but also which thinking processes are considered desirable in developing a critical disposition. Although CT appears to be at the centre of HE and there are generic definitions and prescriptive models of CT skills development, its elusive nature, and the differences in requirements amongst the disciplines render it difficult to grasp for students. BALEAP TEAP Competencies framework offers an understanding of the EAP practitioners' role and practices and relevant research has highlighted the twofold aims of EAP instruction, namely teaching the language of criticality and using language as a tool to apply and express the outcomes of CT thought processes. The teaching approaches offered in the literature reflect the diversity both in

theoretical perceptions of CT and learning and teaching approaches. Furthermore, research has reported a range of difficulties student face in grasping the notion and importance of CT in academia, with students placing more emphasis on the product, that is their marks, while instructors focus more on the process, that is skills development. Especially for international students, such difficulties may stem from a variety of reasons, including differences in educational systems, world views and values, and language proficiency.

This highly complex landscape presents the EAP practitioners with a number of challenges regarding not only what to teach and how to teach it but also how to adapt delivery to cater for the diverse disciplinary and personal development needs of their students. The purpose of our workshop was to offer time and space for a structured de-construction of our experience in teaching CT skills in the EAP classroom and an opportunity to discuss understandings and future directions. We viewed this from a social-constructivist perspective: it is within our professional and knowledge community that this process should initiate and flourish, it is through professional interactions, exchange of views and contextualised experience that CT takes shape as we know it and can be re-shaped, re-formed and re-constructed.

Closing the cycle of reflection for us or rather closing one cycle and opening a new one, we also discussed what new we can experiment on, what changes we can make to our work to incorporate what we have learned from this process. We feel that this process should inform both our research and our teaching. As one of the main challenges emerged was that of cultural bias underlying instructors' and students' perspectives and understandings of what development of CT skills entails and what it means to develop a critical disposition, we will make adaptations to our ongoing research project to obtain more data. This will involve prompts for the student focus groups discussions which will help us understand more about the practical and cultural obstacles they face and how they experience this transition. As part of interviews with staff, we will also ask about their own experience and how they managed to develop a solid critical and analytical disposition. We think these success stories can offer insights into more inclusive developmental strategies. Regarding our practice, we are thinking of ways to organise team-teaching CT skills with colleagues from other disciplines and Learning Developers and use more student-led content in our own classes.

This paper offers a first attempt for structured reflection of our experience as non-participant observers, an account of different quality than that of active participation. We discussed the data collected during

the workshop at a second level of analysis – we focused on the themes, not the raw data. We think that what we lose from departing from the qualitative data by discussing at the level of concept may be leveraged by a dynamic interplay between these concepts and our reflective observations. By 'our' we mean everyone who participated and contributed their thoughts and ideas and 'owns' the raw data and firsthand understandings of how this data was co-created and to what end. It is this dynamic, these reflective conceptualisations of our common experience that can lead to transformative further research, and innovation. Hence, this report does not signal a closure, but a continuation of experience which will hopefully yield positive results from active experimentation within the EAP community and fruitful discussion of those transformative actions in the near future.

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Notes

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