
Published 2014 by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, MILPERRA NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

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An ontological turn in critical thinking in higher education

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It has been argued that higher education pedagogy needs to take an ‘ontological turn’ because the focus on the development of generic skills does not enable students to face the ontological challenge of a ‘supercomplex’ world (Barnett, 2004, 2005). This challenge requires that students are able to develop a sense of an ethical self in relation to competing discourses and perspectives. Higher education is, as yet, ill-equipped to prepare students for this ontological challenge (Barnett, 2004). There is a need, therefore, to review current teaching practices and to develop practices more able to support students in meeting this challenge. Critical thinking is an appropriate teaching and learning area for this type of review, as it is concerned, at least in theory, with teaching students skills to analyse competing discourses.

This paper examines critical thinking in professional education and finds little evidence of an ontological turn. The focus is, instead, on critical thinking as the skill of making judgements. Drawing from theorists who argue against critique being directed at making judgements (Butler, 2001), the paper reviews the limitations of this focus. It is argued that Michel Foucault’s (1984) ‘critical ontology’ can be adapted as a method in critical thinking that addresses the need for an ‘ontological turn’. Further research in this area is warranted in order to develop ontological teaching and learning methods.

Keywords: ontological turn; critical ontologies; critical thinking

Introduction

One of the themes of this conference is the need to prepare graduates for a globalised world. In addressing this, I draw from the work of Ronald Barnett who argues that the challenges of a globalised world are ontological ones. Using the term ‘super complexity’ to characterise globalisation, Barnett claims that educators need to prepare students for these challenges by taking an “ontological turn” (Barnett, 2004, 2005). In short, this turn requires that higher education equip students with the capacity to question the status of truth claims in order to develop modes of action. Barnett (2004) refers to this as a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 3 type knowledge (Barnett, 2004). If we as educators in higher education agree that a globalised world requires the development of ontological knowledge, then we have the responsibility to review and reorganise current teaching and learning practices.

Critical thinking, as an ideal, is focused upon developing the ability to critically analyse discourses in order to develop modes of acting (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007). It seems this might be a good fit with the aims of the ontological turn. However, a closer examination finds that critical thinking in general and critical thinking for professional education in particular, currently has a focus on Mode 1 knowledge. This is evidenced in the belief that critical
thinking is the generic skill of making judgements. This claim is examined by drawing from the work of Peter Facione (2011, 2000, 1997) and further explicated by drawing from theorists of critique (Butler, 2001; Adorno, 1984; Williams, 1974) who have diagnosed the problem in the field of critique. They argue that judgement-making reinstates pre-conceived categories of thought and argue for a type of critique that enables the categories of thought underpinning judgements to be questioned. Butler (2001) suggests that Michel Foucault’s (1984) ‘critical ontology’ is an ontological method that enables such investigation and action.

It is argued that a critical ontology can be adapted as a method of critical thinking in professional education. This can make a contribution to the ontological turn in critical thinking for professional education because it encourages students to consider how knowledge has come to be instated as truth and how this truth effects a sense of self as a professional and the possibilities of acting as a professional. This paper suggests the need for future research in introducing critical ontologies to critical thinking for professional education.

An ontological turn in a supercomplex world

A globalised world raises questions about educational practices in higher education. Barnett’s (2005) notion of supercomplexity (2004, 2005) is useful in providing a framework for such questions. The notion of supercomplexity refers to the rapid increase over the past 50 years of access to different perspectives and the impact this has upon a sense of self. Various perspectives, or at least a version of them, are readily available on the internet. “The descriptions of the world that are available to use – especially in a global and multicultural world - multiply and conflict with each other” (Barnett, 2004, p. 250). This ready availability requires a sophisticated response from the individual in terms of deciding which perspectives are allowed to inform action. Barnett (2004) writes that the challenges of supercomplexity “are, in sum, ontological challenges” (p. 249) because of the demand to consider the status of knowledge claims and how these claims impact upon thought and actions. The onus is thus on higher education to take an “ontological turn” (p. 248). The imperative for the university is to enable students, regardless of their discipline, to have the ontological ability to develop knowledge about the knowledge that jostles for attention to impact upon the self. Although an expected aspect of the Enlightenment, technological change has sped things up considerably.

According to Barnett (2004), higher education does not, as yet, offer students such ontological abilities. He claims that there are three types of knowledge and that Mode 3 knowledge is best for ontological examinations. Currently the university tends towards Mode 1 knowledge, a “formal knowledge having a universal application” (Barnett, 2004. p. 251). In short, and this is explored more fully below, students are generally not expected to challenge truth claims and the effects they might have upon the sense of self but are instead required to adapt to knowledge and develop the appropriate skills connected to this knowledge. This is an epistemological form of knowledge that focuses on the development of generic skills (Dall’Alba & Robyn Barnacle, 2007). Barnett (2004) claims that this mode of knowledge is unsuitable for an age of supercomplexity because it assumes that knowledge and skills are universal and because it does not attend to specific situations and does not attend to the struggle that instated a truth as a truth.

Barnett calls for an ontological turn in education that enables students to develop Mode 3 knowledge. This is a form of knowledge that is understood as a form of questioning of truths and the impact these truths have on a sense of self.
The challenges of supercomplexity...are the challenges that arise from the question: what is a university? Or: what is a teacher? Or: what is a doctor? The challenges of such questions could never be dissolved, at least not in ways similar to those of complexity (Barnett, 2004, p. 249).

According to Barnett (2004), students need to be able to ask: “[W]hat I am as a doctor, student or professor is itself unclear, contested, destabilized” (p. 253). This means that the practices of being a doctor and teacher are open to contestation. Barnett refers to this type of knowledge as the creation of an epistemological gap – a “Mode 3 knowing...which is a knowing-in-and-with-uncertainty” (p. 251). Mode 3 knowledge aims at developing an “‘aporetic’ (i.e. question raising) stance toward knowledge” (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007, p. 612). This stance is a refusal to take truth claims as a given. In Mode 3 knowledge, students are expected to investigate how a truth gained a certain status, consider other truths that have been excluded from the development of a particular truth and to make decisions about action based in the partial nature of truth. This type of knowledge enables only “incomplete judgements” (Barnett, 2004, p. 253).

The onus is on higher education to develop the capacities related to Mode 3 knowledge. Students need to be able to question the truths of discourses in order to decide how to act. Barnett claims that this type of question-posing is insufficiently addressed in higher education. There is a need, therefore, to review current teaching and learning practices in order to develop methods for developing ontological capacities. Given its focus on developing analytical skills, the field of critical thinking would seem to be a natural ally in this ontological question. However, for it to be integrative of an ontological turn, its current focus on making judgements needs to be re-examined.

**Critical thinking in professional education – the skill of making judgements**

Critical thinking has become a deeply entrenched norm of higher education (Gold, Holman & Thorpe, 2002; Phillips & Bond, 2004). This is evidenced in higher education graduate learning outcomes. It is pertinent to consider what critical thinking means in order to understand and address whether it can support an ontological turn in higher education. This is especially necessary because how critical thinking is understood has implications for how it is taught and practised (Moore, 2001). In this section, it is argued that critical thinking in higher education is primarily a “technicist discourse” (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007, p. 605). In particular, critical thinking has been reduced to being understood as the skill of making judgements. This is Mode 1 knowledge. The work of Peter Facione (2000, 2011) and Facione, Facione & Giancarlo (1997) on critical thinking and education for the professions is examined in order to make this claim explicit.

A technicist discourse is increasingly becoming dominant in critical thinking (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007). This discourse takes an instrumentalist, skills-based rationalist approach to critical thinking that aims at developing purposeful, goal-directed thinking towards a task. This is a problematic form of thinking because it identifies with the current status quo of knowledge. Papastephanou & Angeli (2007) write, “[T]he skills perspective identifies uncritically with the criteriology of the sociopolicial system since it focuses so much on successful performance” (p. 373). This can be further understood through examining the current focus on critical thinking on the skill of making judgements.
The belief that critical thinking is about teaching the generic skill of making judgements is evident in the work of Stephen Brookfield (2012). He argues that critical thinking ought to be a process that focuses on assumptions and beliefs to make judgements. “Trying to discover what our assumptions are, and then trying to judge when, and how far, these are accurate, is something that happens every time critical thinking occurs” (p. 7). This belief is also evidenced in Moore’s (2011) study of university academics working in different schools in an Arts faculty, which found that making judgements was a key outcome of critical thinking. “In their attempts to give an account of what critical thinking means, a key theme to emerge...was that it always somehow involved the ‘making of judgements’” (Moore, 2011, p. 265). While the grounds of judgements differed between disciplines – for example, why a judgement is made in the discipline of philosophy differs from why one is made in literary studies – the making of judgements was found to be the universal aim of critical thinking.

The tendency to equate critical thinking with the skill of making judgements in professional education is evidenced in the work of Facione (2011, 2000, 1997). Facione (2000) claims that in the area of professional education, “the general consensus is that critical thinking per se is judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe” (p. 61). In the 2011 update of his study “Critical thinking, what it is and why it counts”, he reiterates the link between critical thinking and judgements. “Considered as a form of thoughtful judgement or reflective decision-making, in a very real sense critical thinking is pervasive” (Facione, 2011, p. 10). He understands critical thinking as ‘thoughtful judgement’. The problem of such an understanding of critical thinking is that it tends to understand judgement in an instrumentalist manner. This is Mode 1 knowledge.

This dependence upon Mode 1 knowledge is evident in an earlier article written by Facione, Facione, & Giancarlo (1997) wherein they argue that “professional judgement is what educators have called critical thinking” (p. 1). They described professional judgement in the following manner this way:

Using critical thinking as the foundational concept, as a working definition professional judgement can be characterized as a goal-oriented decision-making or problem-solving process carried out in the interest of one’s client wherein one gives reasoned consideration to relevant information, criteria, methods, context, principles, policies, and resources (p. 3).

This is evidence of an explicit understanding of what judgement entails: it is a goal-oriented, problem-solving process undertaken in a disinterested manner. This is critical thinking as an instrumentalist practice. The dominance of instrumentalism or Mode 1 knowledge is problem in critical thinking (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007). To contribute to the displacement of this form of technicist knowledge in favour of an ontologocial turn there is a need to examine more closely the problem of making judgements. This is done in the next section through drawing from theorists of critique.

**Thinking critically about making judgements**

This section examines arguments by theorists of critique who claim that limiting critique to the process of making judgements reinstates preconceived categories of thought. This limits the possibilities for thinking new forms of thought and developing new subjectivities suitable for a supercomplex world. Critique can be directed at “instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution” (Butler, 2001, p.1). It is not unusual to apply the practice of critique to the
development of curriculum and pedagogy. Biesta and Stams (2001) argue that since the Enlightenment, critique has “become intimately connected with the question of education” (Biesta & Stams, 2001, p. 58), and claim that critical thinking is an explicit manifestation of this. However, as they make clear, there are different understandings of critical thinking, and it is important to develop a specific understanding.

A paper by Judith Butler (2001) titled “What is critique?” is particularly useful to considering why limiting critical thinking to making judgements is insufficient in an age of supercomplexity. Butler uses the work of Raymond Williams (1974) and Theodor Adorno (1984) to examine the limitations of critique as judgement-making. In Keywords, Williams (1974) argues that it is assumed that judgement is the natural outcome of critique. He traces the definitions of critique over time and writes that although there have been significant changes to its meaning, the “assumption of ‘authoritative judgement’ has not been challenged” (p. 86). This reverberates with critical thinking, as described above. Williams’s main problem with this understanding of critique is that it privileges the abstract rule over the particular response. Williams’s aim is contrary to that, in that he aims to return the specific back to judgement. This is a point also made by Adorno (1984).

Adorno (1984) argues that limiting critique to the making of judgements is complicit with the “ruling mind” (p. 20). For Adorno, making judgements is an administrative event that further embeds “prevailing constellations of power” (Adorno, as cited in Butler, 2001, p.1). This recalls Papastephanou and Angeli’s (2007) criteriology of the sociopolicial (p. 373). Adorno argues that the process of making judgements needs to be able to reveal, not reinforce, such constellations of power. Critique must be a process that reveals how truth became truth. This is necessarily a process of revealing how the general – the truth – became triumphant over the specific. Ruth Irwin (2001), writing on Nietzsche, describes this type of genealogical inquiry as “looking for the contextual ‘emergence’ of an idea, a power struggle” (p. 36). The genealogical method aims to uncover the power struggle that results in the installation of a truth and the specific instances that were the casualties of this struggle. In terms of the current argument, this would enable the specific to impact upon the truth.

In synthesising the arguments of Adorno and Williams, Butler (2001) focuses on their claims that the specific is lost in the process of making judgements, and the general reinstated. She claims that judgements “operate for both thinkers as a way to subsume a particular under an already constituted category” (p. 1). This means that the already constituted, which includes categories of thought as well as institutions and cultural practices, gains further power, and the specific does not impact upon the already constituted. In this way, the specific is repressed and the general rules.

For Adorno, Williams and Butler’s critique can be a radical process that challenges the usual reinstating of preconceived knowledge. This involves a judgement-making that investigates the grounds of truth. Butler (2001) describes this alternative type of judgement-making as the attempt to “apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what it suppresses returns” (p. 1). For Butler, this type of thinking is thinking “the problem of freedom” (p. 1) because it demands thinking about the status, limitations, and possible actions of truth, and because it is an experiment in allowing the specific to make a difference. This stance attempts to disturb “ossified” meanings of professionalism in favor of new understandings. One of the roles of higher education in terms of the ontological turn is to develop the capacity to take this
type of questioning stance. Butler’s turn to Foucault’s (1984) critical ontology offers insight into how this might be achieved.

**Foucault's critical ontology**

If it is agreed that an ontological turn is necessary in critical thinking, then there is a need to develop ontological methods that might prove useful for higher education curriculum. Butler (2001) suggests that Foucault’s (1984) critical ontology is an appropriate alternative to judgement-making critique. This section considers the relevance of Foucault’s ontology to critical thinking in professional education in order to support an ontological turn.

Foucault’s method is a kind of genealogy; a genealogy of the ideals and truth that impact upon a sense of self. In ‘What is critique’, Foucault (1984) describes it as, an ontology that is, more than anything else, an attitude towards the self:

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly as a theory, a doctrine, nor even a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault, 1984, p. 50).

For Foucault, the aim of a critical ontology is to critique a sense of self through an historical analysis of the limits imposed upon us. A critical ontology attempts to analyse how some categories of thought, some institutions and some cultural imperatives have become established as truths, and to investigate what has been excluded for the categories to reign. Butler describes this type of ontological investigation as posing “questions of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (Butler, 2001, p. 3). This compliments the arguments made above that an ontological turn in higher education requires that students are enabled to develop a questioning stance to knowledge.

Foucault’s critical ontology addresses the need to question truth claims in order to understand their impact on our actions. It is also an experiment in thinking otherwise. In writing about critical ontologies in relation to organisational theory, Andrew Chan (2000) suggests that organisational theorists can develop ontologies to address questions such as: “What are the limits to which we are subject and how can we free ourselves? What is the possibility of change, how, when and by whom?” (p. 1059). This type of investigation or reflection is directed towards “reclaim[ing] the subjects from these norm-fixings so that they can, freely and creatively, self re-present” (p. 1060).

Critical thinking in professional education could adapt this method as a way of enabling students to investigate the status of the knowledge upon which they must base their judgements. This is a significant shift, as it requires students to judge truth in order to get an idea about why it is truth and what has been excluded from truth. It requires a pause in acceptance in order to allow the specific to return to truth. Generic skills and truths are not generated from such deliberation, as they, at the very least, have an understanding that they are “incomplete” and, at the very best, have been developed with the specific at the centre.
Conclusion

This paper has examined the idea that an ontological turn is required in higher education to enable students to face the ontological challenges of a supercomplex, globalised world. If critical thinking is understood as the generic skill of making judgements, then the danger remains that the categories of thought that ground such judgements are left unchallenged. This includes the categories of ‘professional’ and ‘unprofessional’. The professionalism that results will tend to be ossified, rigid, and unable to respond to supercomplexity.

It has been suggested in this paper that Michel Foucault’s (1984) critical ontology can be introduced to critical thinking. This is a form of ontology that takes a critical stance towards the self and the knowledge that impact upon a sense of self. Further research into the ontological turn more generally, and into critical ontologies specifically, can make a substantial contribution to understandings of critical thinking for professional education.

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