

# **What can critical thinking do for access to higher education adult learners at a further education art institution?**

## **Reflections on a poetry group**

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### **Introduction**

Although art students would prefer to make and create with their hands rather than write using thinking skills (Somerson and Hermano, 2013), nevertheless using a poetry group as a pedagogic intervention could help participants become more motivated to write because Lipman (2010) states when students engage in dialogue and collaboration they also participate in critical, caring and creative thinking. The purpose of this research is to discuss the importance of criticality and independent thinking for lifelong and WP students, and to outline a small experimental CT intervention of a poetry group. The author's interest in FE and lifelong learners began when writing a paper on curriculum design for the SUNCETT Research Development Fellow programme. Her interest in CT was ignited when reading Elder and Paul (2018) who believe much of thinking left to itself can be biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or prejudiced. They have developed a framework they call the Elements of Thought, to be discussed later. This current research into CT is likely to be of interest to teaching practitioner-researchers who may want to meaningfully enhance the experience of their students in developing thinking that is creative, caring and critical (Lipman, 2010). The question at issue is whether a poetry group may benefit some students in developing CT skills. The implications of increasing criticality for lifelong learners and WP adults is that it has the possibility of generating social mobility, social cohesion and cultural capital through a CoI built on trust and support.

The concepts of two key educational philosophers underpin the research and activities in this chapter: Brown (1998) has written of the importance of informal learning spaces; Lipman (2010) conceptualises cooperation and dialogue as a way of embodying CT. This chapter illustrates what happens when the author put educational theory into practice in the poetry group, and makes inference and interpretation based on datasets collected. WP adult learners and participants Matuta and Janus (anonymised names) talk about doubts they had at the beginning of the intervention in their focus group video:

it's not something I'd ever contemplated doing at all, but I thought I'm going to college so it's in for a penny in for a pound, I'll give it a go and actually I love it in a way I never believed that I would. I really enjoy it...it's more of a challenge. I thought, I can't do this...I thought it was going to be daunting.

Research demonstrates how participants moved from self-doubt and apprehension, to a less tentative and more confident, assured way of expressing themselves. Findings indicate that using a CoI to investigate CT accesses the legacy of the critical traditions. Participants have become more articulate, dialogic and discursive in the group, which has in turn had an impact on their written course work.

## **Theoretical framework and policy context**

### **Global perspectives on critical thinking**

The Canadian Ministry of Education states that all students will need to develop a flexibility and a versatility undreamed of by previous generations (Shaheen, 2007). Using CT could develop flexibility by encouraging students to have an open, growth mind-set (Dweck, 2015) and versatility by using questioning to interrogate assumptions and points of view (Elder and Paul, 2018). OfS (2016: 5) states:

Better [thinking] skills enable freedom of opportunity, provide people with the tools to adapt to a changing world and promote social mobility, inclusion and wellbeing.

The report highlights and promotes critical skills for adults and asserts CT is the means to adapt to a changing world. Further, they mention the freedom that CT skills can afford lifelong learners by providing choice and agency in their lives. Developing CT skills gives them options out of low-wage employment through education, progression to Higher Education (HE), careers, and professions that may not have been open to them before. This is a route to increase social capital and thereby open the path to social mobility.

Splitter and Sharp (1995), in a study commissioned by the Australian Council for Educational Research, state that CT in education inspires topics for ethical inquiry, such as friendship, sexuality, peace, discrimination, health and the environment. In a similar vein, the OfS (2016) states that the inclusion of the concept of wellbeing demonstrates the notion that CT is not merely relevant in the realm of the scientific and logical. It is also useful in the development of the whole human being, mind and body, as it can promote emotional intelligence and soft skills, which are necessary for interaction in personal relationships, community, politics, and the workplace.

The Department of e-Learning (2015) counts CT as an essential element of education, part of the six Cs or 21st century competencies: collaboration, communication, CT, creativity, citizenship and character education. This demonstrates CT has a foundational role in the development of policy for education. Maltese Policy (The Department of e-Learning 2015) speaks of citizenship, taking responsibility for our actions, understanding that neighbourhoods and communities are everyone's responsibility as all being part of living an adult life. CT requires us to question, to seek answers and to speak truth to power about our experiences in the places where we live, pray and work. When the report writes about character education (Department of e-Learning, 2015: 1) this parallels a UK Department of Education (DfE) (2019) framework guidance on character development. This document also outlines the need for soft skills development.

Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015) is a policy promoting 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Education being SDG4), global literacy and education, including lifelong learning, as a way out of low wage employment and

poverty. UNESCO (2019) have an expanded definition of the concept of literacy which is now understood beyond its conventional concept of reading, writing and counting. Literacy is comprehended as a means of interpretation, identification, understanding, creation, and communication. Literacy also includes being conversant in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich, multi-platform and fast-changing world. CT is part of this augmented understanding of literacy and education, one that adult learners may have little experience of, possibly because of lack of opportunity and not being a digital native. Broadhead et al (2019: 2) state:

Social, cultural, health, economic, or political factors mean some students do not get a fair opportunity to achieve when at school age.

Non-traditional learners sometimes have a broken flow of educational experience, often it is interrupted by family commitments, caring responsibilities or having to work to support themselves and their family.

## **Literature on critical thinking in education**

The conceptual framework for this chapter is constructed on the writings of Lipman (2010) and Brown (1998). Although these books were written a generation ago, they contain important thinking about CT in education.

The first theory by Brown (1998: 186) proposes that education can happen in informal learning venues:

Alternative learning situations which by design or necessity, place a premium on collaborative discussion and inquiry between intellectual peers.

Taking the poetry group on a field trip to a local Art Gallery Café is a way of teaching students in a new context. Participants report that the poetry group offers an informal learning space and a respite from the pressures of qualification-focused learning:

You just want to write down your thoughts, you just do it and it's quite cathartic in a sense... it has helped me just to calm down just

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get my thoughts out... it's something else to think about rather than constant uni work. - WP student participant Hebe

The second theorist, Lipman (2010: 3) emphasises the importance of cooperation and dialogue in the development of CT and pedagogy. Lipman, (2010: 20) continues that by using his three dimensions of thinking, critical, caring and creative thinking:

Students listen to each other with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinion, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said and seek to identify one another's assumptions. A Community of Inquiry attempts to follow the inquiry where it leads rather than be penned in by the boundary lines of existing disciplines.

CoI actions such as debating, writing, speaking and listening (Fisher, 2013) develop strategies for allowing what is in a student's mind to get out (Geertz, 2000).

## **Methodology**

The ontological underpinning of this chapter is heuristic in that it explores the subjective experience of developing CT with and within a group of students. The epistemology is framed by an interpretivist paradigm. Scott and Usher (1996: 18) state:

In social research knowledge is concerned not with generalisation, prediction or control but with interpretation, meaning and illumination... it focuses on social practices. It assumes that all human action is meaningful.

In a CoI such as the poetry group, participants have agency in choosing poems to read and writing themes. Accompanying this participant agency is teaching presence (Garrison et al, 2000) which plans structures and facilitates the group. Interpretation and illumination come from the analysis and to further this the author draws on her 20 years' experience

in teaching, her focused knowledge of texts on CT in education and her understanding of her students' stories.

Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010: 4) use poetry as epistemology, methodology and dataset analysis. They state that experimental anthropologists prefer encounters amid 'cultural borderlands'. The borders are the most interesting places holding the tension between educational policy and the reality of teaching. Working in an innovative mode is key for the participants and researchers in the poetry group set in an art institution (Biesta and Lutters, 2017).

## **Design**

This chapter concerns a small-scale piece of qualitative, practitioner research. The group sessions are held weekly at lunch times, at which participants listen to a published poem. After this participants read a poem they have written. Participants write a weekly poem for homework, based on a theme and poetic forms suggested in the poems read or by a member of the group. Topics include the five senses, as illustrated in the poem by Imtiaz Dharker (2015) called *Tissue* (2015) or Liz Berry's Birmingham Roller (2011) writing a poem using Birmingham dialect. Young (2007: 51) states that poetry literature circles build verbal communication skills, tap into the power of expression and help students create personal connections to texts. They also build analytical thinking skills and develop a community of learners. Literacy used by participants in the poetry group when writing poems and reading them is a powerful truth-telling medium.

The research ethics for this chapter employs guidelines from BERA (2018) and has received ethical approval from University of Sunderland, Leeds Arts University. This chapter aims to protect and anonymise participants and institutions.

## **Participants**

There are 18 volunteer participants who attend a 26 week poetry group. All are from the AHE group on a level 3 diploma in art and design. The age range is between 19 and 60 years of age. Of the 18, 14 are women and

four are men. Broecke and Hamed (2008: 1) note that the 2005/06 figures for 17-30 year olds showed a 7.2 percentage participation gap in favour of women, a gap which is widening.

There are 14 WP students out of 18 participants, which is 77.7 per cent. This is much higher than the national average entering HE in 2013 which was 22 per cent (DfE, 2016). The reason for this could be that an AHE course is a second chance route, designed to aid progression for non-traditional students. There are four BAME students and eight students whose households speak an additional language to English. Participants are self-selecting. An introductory talk about the poetry group was given to the AHE students and volunteers were then given an information sheet to take away, and a participant ethics form to complete. They were informed they could leave at any time, all names would be anonymised and that the datasets would be used in this chapter.

## **Method and dataset collection**

Research methods are unstructured peer group video interviews and field notes. The videos were filmed in informal settings such as lunchtime in the classroom and the Gallery café. Filming is done informally on camera-phones. The loose way the conversation flows allows students to be themselves and speak freely. The eight videos were transcribed, and the 12 field notes offer the author a chance to record her thoughts. A weakness of the method is that attempting to conduct dialogue both as an insider and an outsider exposes a power relation differential that could complicate the investigation. However, in countering that concept being an insider researcher gives increased local knowledge and an understanding of the context and politics of the institution (McNiff, 2014). This aids in the organisation of dataset collection events and finding participants.

## **Dataset analysis method**

This qualitative research study employs the procedures and practices of thematic analysis. This is a flexible approach to dataset analysis (Nowell et al, 2017) and can provide rich and detailed knowledge of qualitative research. Thematic analysis is developed using interpretation in context

(Nowell et al, 2017). This employs identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within datasets. Transcripts of video interviews are read, highlighted, labelled and categorised using thematic analysis. Campbell-Galman, (2013) calls it fracturing the datasets in order to see the elements, so as to illuminate and interpret the meaning. Common themes are then labelled and interpreted, (Denscombe, 2017; Bell and Waters, 2018: 227).

## **Findings**

Participants have commented on their vocabulary improving through listening to poems written by published authors and other participants. It is also empowering for participants and myself to be able to be a whole person, freed from our power dynamics and roles of student and teacher, and to become co-participants (Burke 2001 and Durrant 2015).

The two themes from the poetry group are that CT is a skill, a practice, and a muscle that needs developing, and that by using questioning CT it increases reflection. WP participant Janus states:

I think that pushing someone through teaching them in that Socratic way is what really makes the deep critical thinker.

There was much discussion about giving oneself permission to have an opinion, which is one example of the cultural and class barriers to overcome in the poetry group. Some of the obstacles are socially constructed class systems and some are self-imposed, based on the individual's social locators. British Ethnic Minority (BAME) student participant Skerion states:

It's like the only way to know if there is a line, is to cross it.

Creating a safe space for creativity, expression of feelings, and a non-judgemental arena for ideas and points of view is important to participants. What came out strongly among the poetry writers is the theme of a social conscience. The group identified social conscience as having a moral compass, self-restraint, and having a kind of internalised citizenship.



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These were considered to be a set of precepts by which one is deemed decent, kind, caring, considerate, creative. Concepts of one's contribution to the community as a whole. Participant Terpsichore states:

Some of the themes words and emotions, things that I've got covered, I might use in the art and art therapy course next year.

Frances: talk about the link between poetry and writing in your practical work.

Maybe in the future I could be published because I've got a few [poems] from the past with universal themes, maybe mesh the poems together. I think poetry definitely lets me speak about things that are not often spoken about, done in a really subtle way.

I believe what Terpsichore is trying to express that through the self-expression of poetry, she and the group give themselves permission to explore the big questions about life, death, relationships, politics and religion, but it allows for a soft-treading subtlety. The poetry encourages the participants to be whole human beings not just students, but people with emotions, feelings and CT.

## **Discussion**

### **What can critical thinking do for WP adults and lifelong learners in FE?**

There are many aspects to thinking critically; in this section, the research discusses CT in relation to progression, self-development, social mobility, social capital, social cohesion and critical making for lifelong learners at an art institution. Educator and policy advisor, Coffield (2000: 4) states,

Lifelong learning can contribute to the development of knowledge and skills for employment, and other areas of adult life.

Since Coffield's (2000) book was published there has been much focus on andragogy (the education of adults), lifelong learning, and WP education

by organisations like the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE). As datasets from this research demonstrate, teaching adults goes beyond employability and refocuses on education for education's sake, for self developments and enjoyment. This chapter could also go some way to addressing research underpinned by current theory.

In a later publication, Coffield (2010: 34) claims that education is not just for the passing of exams and the gaining of qualifications; it is also to develop criticality, independence and the traits of lifelong learning. The adult learners in this research benefitted from growing in confidence as a group and as Coffield mentions, developing criticality.

Elder and Paul (2018) of the Critical Thinking Movement, have developed a framework they call the Elements of Thought. They posit that we use concepts, ideas and theories to interpret datasets, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues. Whenever we think, we think for a purpose within a point of view, based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. Thinking, generates purposes, raises questions, uses information, utilizes concepts, makes inferences and assumptions, generates implications, and embodies a point of view. The poetry group can offer students a chance to develop as a whole person with logic and emotions, mind and body.

Student participant Lamia, of Eastern European heritage, states:

I think it has encouraged me to think a bit more about what I say and how I say it in here and outside.

Lamia reflects that questioning, thinking, sharing and listening has had an effect on her reflective process. Being part of the poetry group could be said to have increased her thoughtfulness and consideration. This is her second time at Gimmerton, having completed the Extended Diploma (for 16-18 year olds). This course should have been the springboard to HE, but a reticence held her back to repeat a year in AHE. The poetry group has seen her grow as a person in confidence, become more involved,

share more. She has now graduated AHE and continues being a creative practitioner in writing and art.

Somerson and Hermano (2013) from Rhode Island Art School in the US demonstrate that CT is at the heart of their practical curriculum. They write that students are immersed in a culture where exploring questions, ideas and objects and using and inventing materials are all forms of CT, albeit through the use of their hands. They call this critical making. An art education for adult and WP learners is a radical step away from conformity. What is meant by this is that an art education may not have a prescribed career path towards monetary wealth in the same way that a learner studying to be an accountant or research scientist may expect. Smith and Smith (2014) say that an art education can offer better mental wellbeing and that culture can bring hope. For adult learners art can provide the start of a new conversation and when that conversation includes thinking deeply, asking questions and looking beneath the surface, they are using CT skills.

Coalter (2008) understands the value of CT in the FE classroom and the difference it can make to progression. Coalter (2008) and Hooks (2007) agree that CT enables the students to self-actualize and self-motivate across class, gender and race. Burke (2001) states she uses CT in her pedagogical method to revitalise discussions within her FE classroom. CT enables lifelong learners to access and question normative practices in politics, the British class system, gender politics and race relations. She sees FE as a radical forum of ideas expressed through CT, questioning and dialogics. She believes that FE students would benefit from practices that are inclusive and responsive to fluidity and context.

Datasets demonstrate that social mobility for FE adult learners may have been the driving factor behind some learners going into education. Janus has not worked for the past eighteen years whilst her children have been at school; she has valued her time on AHE and has seen it as an opportunity for self-development. She aims to progress to HE, with the goal of gaining self-employment as an artist and designer. She takes every opportunity offered and is an enthusiastic member of the poetry group. Hebe is a young man from a decommissioned mining community in a WP area. Since participating in the poetry group he is now on an undergraduate

graphic design course and has dreams of becoming a graphic designer. When asked what he found surprising about the poetry group, he replied:

I suppose... it was surprising how accessible it is. There seems to be some sort of idea that you have to be some kind of some profound thinker ... very elaborate and write very interesting poems but really you can just sit down and have a good think and come up with anything.

He is the first in his family to go to University and tells us the peer pressure from family and friendship groups to marry and gain blue-collar employment is very strong. His preconceptions about who is allowed to write or read poetry is, he tells us reflective of a background of narrowly conceived gender stereotypes and career choices.

Kennedy (1997) outlines the need for adult learning to reach into the community, and education to work for social cohesion as well as encouraging social mobility. As a means to increase social mobility and social capital, CT skills could be instrumental for escaping poverty and gaining qualifications. Participant Skerion, a BAME student of African heritage, expresses his future hopes,

... I find myself now... everything I think about, future projects and stuff, I want to see if there's any way that I can implement my ideas, anything.

He reflects that CT in the poetry group can extend his hopes beyond the writing of poetry, that it could expand the concept of where he could go and what he could be capable of. Perhaps it gave him ambition and the sight of a new horizon. According to the DfE (2018: 13) UK social mobility is low by international standards and does not appear to be improving. Education could be part of the solution, the CT intervention pilot might indicate that education must be more than the mere dissemination of knowledge. In order to achieve social mobility and a path away from poverty there needs to be a more holistic approach to education. The OfS (2016: 5) highlights the importance of social mobility and inclusion, which indicate the benefits that were gained by participants in the CT

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intervention pilot. Matuta an adult lifelong learner states that the poetry group is an ice breaker and a reason to talk to people. Janus, an adult WP student, states:

I think everyone's clicked into a very warm friendly group I like the support and supportive atmosphere.

and Skerion:

you want to be there, just to hear everyone's stories behind the poems, that I find very interesting.

and Terpsichore, an adult BAME student from the city's Pakistani community, states:

when you do poetry and especially when you are listening to other people's poems it gives you a different perspective on things.

In order to adjust to a changing world and not be left behind students need to be flexible and adaptable problem solvers.

## **Conclusion**

The central theme of the chapter asks, what can CT do for AHE, WP and lifelong learners? Datasets demonstrate that the poetry group encourages group bonding and investigating topics together in a CoI provides a safe space to be creative human beings. Extracurricular activities like the poetry group help to increase progression to HE by developing transferable skills. All the students in this research graduated from AHE, some went on to creative arts undergraduate courses and some have continued in their creative practice. The habit of poetry writing as an outlet for creativity seems to be one that the participants enjoyed and want to continue. Terpsichore states,

I think I'm going to try and continue it rather than just stopping it because you just don't want to stop.

Student participant, Skerion:

I just want to write more, hopefully get to a place where I can, when I've finished uni.

CT is useful to AHE students. Through the poetry group intervention, participants have increased their vocabulary and developed confidence in public speaking and creative writing. The intervention also gave access to critical skills and philosophical dialogics, knowledge which can be applied in HE, employment in the creative industries, self-employment or apprenticeships. The intervention saw students enjoying group bonding, social cohesion and addressing issues of mindfulness and citizenship. In the poetry group, participants allowed themselves to be open to new ideas and thoughts, and developed speaking and listening skills. They also went beyond their cultural locators, moving towards social mobility and increased cultural capital through progression. The poetry group offers participants an intergenerational, cross-cultural space to tell their story, which could enable social cohesion in an education setting and in wider citizenship areas.

Terpsichore eloquently expresses the value and insight about others she has gained from the Intervention,

Putting yourself in that person's shoes I think that's the element that I found really good about critical thinking. People's emotions are so raw and so special. What's really nice about it [the poetry group] nowadays when everything is so fractured, manufactured... it's so nice to be somewhere where people are really authentic and genuine.

Scholars such as Brown (1998) argue that a lack of criticality in the education system is a problem. This is highlighted and explored by Norton and Gregson (2020) who state that, treating students not just as recipients of knowledge but including them in the process of their own knowledge development enables a more profound species of learning to take place. In relation to the gap in criticality, I establish that when introduced to CT adult learners become confident problem solvers with transferable skills, based on my qualitative fieldwork with participants in an art institution. Lipman (2010) promotes cooperation and dialogue as

a means to accessing criticality. Using non-teaching time for enrichment activities such as the poetry group seems to have been beneficial for the participants in this group. Our professional relationship with students, as educators may also encompass their stories, enabling us to see and connect with students as whole people. CT offers a range of thinking and dialogic skills as well as the soft skills needed in personal and professional life. These are meaningful and transferrable skills for FE art students, WP adults and lifelong learners.

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