

The place (and places) of critical thinking in disciplinary education: Implications for assessment

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The idea of critical thinking continues to occupy a central place in discussions about the aims and purposes of higher education. Debates around this idea centre on the question of what critical thinking is exactly, and how it is best developed in students on university programmes. In this paper I discuss findings from a study that investigated ideas about critical thinking as held by academics working in a range of disciplines: History; Philosophy; Cultural Studies. Their responses pointed to a variety of understandings and practices. At least seven definitional strands were identified in the study *viz*: critical thinking: i) as judgement; ii) as skepticism; iii) as a simple originality; iv) as sensitive readings of texts; v) as rationality; vi) as an activist engagement with knowledge; and vii) as self-reflexivity. Along with discussing academics reported ideas about critical thinking, I also consider how these variable definitions find expression in a range of assessment tasks set for students. A ‘multiple meanings’ (or ‘polysemous’) understanding of critical thinking is thought to have important implications for teaching and learning (and for educational policy more generally), especially how this quality is appropriately developed and assessed on programmes. The design of the study and the conclusions drawn from it draw heavily on Wittgenstein’s idea of meaning as use.