

# PRACTICES OF CRITICAL THINKING, CRITICALITY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Richard Pemberton & Mike Nix

*In this paper, we explore the development of critical thinking and criticality, and how they connect with learner autonomy, in two contexts. Richard discusses the development of critical thinking skills by student teachers taking an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the University of Nottingham, and Mike considers the role that criticality plays in the self-directed academic literacy of undergraduate law students at Chuo University. We then use Ron Barnett's model of criticality (Barnett, 1997) and a social practices approach to consider some different forms that criticality takes and how these relate to understandings of autonomy.*

本論では、二つの事例を通じて、クリティカルシンキングとクリティカリティの発達について、そして、どのようにしてこれらが学習者自律性（オートノミー）と関連づけられるかを考える。Richardは、ノッティンガム大学のTESOL（英語を母国語としない人に対する英語教育）修士課程で学んでいる英語教師によるクリティカルシンキングの能力の発達について論じ、Mikeは中央大学法学部生の自律的なアカデミック・リテラシークラスにおいてクリティカリティが果たす役割について取り上げる。そして、Ron Barnett のクリティカリティのモデル(Barnett, 1997) と social practices approachを用いて、クリティカリティの取る様々な形態とこれらがどのように学習者自律性（オートノミー）の理解と結びついているかを考察する。

## Introduction

Criticality and learner autonomy are both widely seen as desirable educational goals, and often understood as interdependent or even mutually indispensable attributes. Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007), for example, claim that, “The competence to think critically is coextensive with the notion of autonomy and self-sufficiency” (p. 43). And in a well-known characterisation, Little (1991) describes autonomy as a capacity “for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (p. 4). We share this belief that it is important for students to develop both their criticality and autonomy and we have both been exploring ways to help students achieve this in the two quite different contexts in which we work: a postgraduate MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programme at the University of Nottingham in the UK, where Richard teaches and Mike did some research during his 2010-2011 sabbatical year; and a programme to develop students’ academic literacy in English

in the Law Faculty at Chuo University in Japan, where Mike teaches. Reflecting on this work ourselves, and discussing it together, has raised many questions for us about criticality, critical thinking, and autonomy: What do we mean by criticality and critical thinking, and is it useful to distinguish between them? How do they help the development of learner autonomy, and how does learner autonomy support the growth of criticality and critical thinking? Do different approaches to learner autonomy encourage particular understandings of criticality? Does, for example, emphasizing “the conceptual link between autonomy and rationality” (Raya et al., 2007, p. 43) imply criticality is the application of logical thinking techniques? If, like Little (1991, p. 4), we take learner autonomy to be a “particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of...learning”, do we then approach critical thinking as a matter of individual cognitive development? Or do we need a more socially situated understanding of criticality and autonomy, and to recognise, as Esch (2009) suggests, a choice between two roads: “the road giving prominence to individual *personal autonomy* or the road giving prominence to *autonomy as the capacity to exercise critical thinking about learning as a participant in a social milieu*” (p. 33, italics in the original)?

These questions become more important for advocates of learner autonomy to address as the top-down pressure to develop students’ ability to think critically increases in educational contexts around the world. Criticality has already become a key requirement in courses and evaluation in higher education in the UK, where Richard currently works. In Hong Kong, where Richard worked previously, the development of critical thinking often appears as a stated aim of educational policy documents, and many teachers agree with its importance but have differing views of what it means and how to facilitate it (Stapleton, 2011). In Japan, where Mike works, education policies to promote criticality at a national, or even local, level are not yet significant, but there seems to be a growing belief amongst language teachers in the necessity of promoting students’ critical thinking, a trend reflected in the recent formation of a Critical Thinking SIG in JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching) as well as the longer-term existence of a similar SIG in JACET (the Japan Association of College English Teachers). Importantly, there are divergent conceptions of criticality in educational policy (and pedagogy) in various countries, including Japan and the UK. These include:

- a liberal arts emphasis on the role of critical thinking in the rounded intellectual growth of the individual;
- a civic-minded association of criticality with active and informed participation in democratic citizenship; and
- a more instrumental focus on critical thinking skills as one of a range of capacities demanded of the workforce by the rapidly changing, information-based economy of the early 21st century (Barnett, 1997; Johnston, Mitchell, Myles, & Ford, 2001, pp. 97-100).

Whilst autonomy will likely continue to be an educational buzzword (Little, 1991), critical thinking is clearly now another very important one (Stapleton, 2011) and the insistent, and

discordant, noise in educational policy and practice around the need for different forms of criticality will probably also impact upon thinking about the development of learner autonomy.

Claims about the interrelatedness of autonomy and criticality focus on capacities for, or states of being, autonomous and critical. There seems, however, to be little research that investigates the actual dynamics of how learners become more autonomous and critical in specific educational contexts, or of the synergies and tensions that pedagogy for criticality and autonomy might encounter in practice. In this paper, we explore some of these questions for our two contexts. In what follows, Richard explains, in response to questions from Mike, his work developing critical thinking with student teachers on the MA TESOL programme at Nottingham. Mike then discusses, also in a question and answer format, the development of criticality and autonomy with undergraduate students in the Law Faculty at Chuo. Finally, we use Barnett's (1997) work on criticality and critical being, as well as the idea of literacies as socially situated practices, as frames to make sense of criticality and autonomy across contexts.

### **Richard: Developing Critical Thinking with MA TESOL Students at the University of Nottingham**

#### **What Is the Context You are Working in?**

The teaching context is a one-year MA TESOL programme at the University of Nottingham. This caters mainly for overseas student teachers, some of whom have fairly limited teaching experience: the minimum requirement is only two months. The main elements of the programme are three 20-credit core modules, four 15-credit electives, and a 60-credit dissertation. (The modules and electives are listed on the [course structure page](#) of the programme website). The assessment for the programme is very academic: there are essay assignments for each module (of 4,000 words and 3,000 words) and the dissertation is 12,000-15,000 words.

At the same time, we are very much trying to help students relate the academic input they receive to their own teaching contexts, so that they apply theory to practice throughout the course. This is emphasized in the main stated aim of the course: “to develop your critical understanding of recent developments in TESOL theory and practice and to stimulate you to reflect on your own teaching” (see the [programme website](#)). So, as well as the combination of theory and practice, it's important that “developing critical understanding” is fronted up quite clearly as the key aim of the course. Critical thinking therefore plays an important role throughout the programme at Nottingham.

#### **Why Focus on Developing Critical Thinking Rather than Learner Autonomy?**

One of the reasons for the focus on critical thinking is that learner autonomy is, to a large extent, a given in the course. It underpins the whole approach to postgraduate study so that, for example, the students have control not only over where and when they study, but also over what and how. The topics for assignments are normally chosen and developed by the students,

and the whole content, structure and approach of their writing is also decided by them. So these elements of freedom and choice, which are obviously central aspects of learner autonomy, are also crucial in postgraduate study. These are supported, of course, by teaching and tutorials, and also by learning circles, small study groups that we have set up, that are a key way for students to develop learner autonomy collaboratively and therefore an important part of the course. Overall, then, the importance of learner autonomy in the programme is very much assumed.

Unlike learner autonomy, however, critical thinking is an overt part of the assessment framework at Nottingham and other UK universities. For example, as Table 1 shows, one of the marking criteria at merit level (equivalent to a B grade) for Masters courses in the School of Education at Nottingham states that students should be able to critique research and practice, so that is a criterion we look out for when we mark assignments. As a result, it is important for students to develop their criticality if they are to do well on the course.

Table 1

*Grading Criteria for Masters Level Courses (Evison & Pemberton, 2009, p. 32)*

	<b>DISTINCTION</b>	<b>MERIT</b>	<b>PASS</b>
Analysis, reflection and criticality	Demonstrates ability to analyse and <b>critique theory, research and accounts of practice</b>	Shows evidence of strong analytical ability; <b>able to critique research and practice</b>	Demonstrates some evidence of analytical ability and capacity for reflection

Another reason for this focus is that critical thinking is key to the development we want students to make during the MA. By the time they finish the programme, we want them to feel they are part of an academic teaching community and able, for example, to pick up an *ELT Journal* article and take a critical position on issues that they read about which affect their own teaching context. So by the end of the MA, we would like students to be able to take critical positions on issues that impact on them.

### **Which Parts of the Programme Support Students in Developing Their Critical Thinking?**

There are two main parts of the programme which support critical thinking. The first is the learning circles, the small study groups which meet every week outside of regular class time. In these, students have the opportunity to discuss theories and research that they have been introduced to in class, and come across in their own reading, and then relate these to their own different contexts. So the learning circles are an important arena for students to start developing their own positions within a very safe and supportive group environment.

The second type of support involves a series of curriculum features that my colleague, Jane Evison, and I introduced specifically to prepare students to develop the ability to critique research and practice, on which they are assessed during the course. As well as a workshop on critical reading, this support includes two mini-assignments in the first semester. The first is a comparative literature review in which students are expected to show their own stance at some point. The second is a critique of the methodology of a particular paper in which they need to be able to identify methodological strengths or weaknesses of the paper. An extreme example of the latter might be to question how sound it is to draw statistical conclusions from a survey of five people. These assignments are supported by group tutorials that take place before students begin individual reading and writing for the assignment, where we model the type of writing that is expected and students discuss example papers in groups. Students often surprise themselves actually by the insights they can come up with when working together in these tutorials.

### **What Are the Aims in Supporting Students to Develop Their Critical Thinking?**

There are four main aims we have in providing students with help for improving their critical thinking. The first is for students to feel they can critically evaluate the academic work they read. This is something that, very understandably, they find difficult when they start the course, especially if they have limited knowledge or experience. Many will think, “What right have I got to critique published work?” But we want them to learn to see that they do have this right—that everyone can express an opinion. Second, of course, opinions by themselves are not enough. We expect students to be able to support their position with reasoned argument, to develop a justified stance. Thirdly, we hope that students will express themselves in *their own way*, without feeling that they have to closely follow a formula, and that they will be able to develop their own voice.

And our last aim in supporting critical thinking—and this may appear a very grand aim—is for students to become *producers* rather than *reproducers* of knowledge. Of course, to an extent, all of us reproduce knowledge, but we want to move students away from merely repeating what X and Y have said, and to be able to add something of themselves. Again, we would like to reach the point where the reader can see something of the student’s own position in their writing.

### **What Kinds of Development Are Students Making as a Result of This?**

The following four quotes from interviews with students on the programme are representative of the kinds of progress we see from students in developing their critical thinking.

**Rebecca:** *For me critical reading is a lot more useful than I felt before. I think I used to treat it like a task that our tutor pushed us to do this. Now I think I felt the necessity... I try to find the support from the materials for my assignment... I actually enjoy challenging myself.*

**Samantha:** *I expected to come in and this guy or this woman would tell me “OK this is how it’s supposed to be done and this is the right way”, or whatever, but then you realise there is no right. Initially it’s frustrating but then you soon learn that it’s better when you get to choose, you know and you justify those choices, so I like the way that in class we always had*

*to discuss our point of view, our experiences, bring them in, compare them, use them, use the theories that we're learning, and I think by explaining our opinions, we realise "OK this is where I stand, this is the way I see it."*

**Deborah:** *I felt what we read in books are not 100% correct. That's what I learned. I found once we are reading books we will believe everything which is written in the book, we believe the author's beliefs, but I felt it's incorrect and this kind of stuff may be not appropriate or suitable to my teaching context. So after nine months I know how to decide what is right and what is wrong depends on his evidence and whether this is applicable in my context. This is what I learned.*

**Susan:** *Before I was just a receiver, a passive receiver, I would read whatever I have and just accept it for what it is. Never occurred to me that—well even if it occurred to me, I felt that it wouldn't be right to question, I mean if something's published, you have the impression that it's published, it's everywhere, it's right, it can't be wrong. But now I feel like "No, you can argue, you can say what's on your mind", I mean before I used to say "How can you argue a person like that, a really well-known writer or whatever", but now I feel "No, you can do it"—as long as you're arguing with reason. I feel like I have a voice now.*

In each case, we can clearly see development from the start to the end of the course. For Rebecca, the first student, there is a clear movement from a very externalised motivation in the first assignment to a much more internalised motivation by the end of the course. In Samantha's case, we see the clear development of a justified stance. Deborah shows the developing ability to read critically in terms of applicability to her own context. And with Susan we have the development of her own voice. Obviously, students develop at different rates, but this kind of development is something that we see in almost all of the students taking the MA TESOL programme at Nottingham.

### **Mike: Developing Criticality and Autonomy in English With Law Students at Chuo University**

#### **What is the Context You Are Working in?**

I teach in the Taught-in-English programme in the Law Faculty at Chuo University (see the [programme website](#) for more information). The Faculty has three divisions—Law, Politics, and International Business and Law—which means students have a range of interests, not just in law but in politics, international relations, human rights, development issues, trade, business, and globalization. In the Taught-in-English programme, we want to give students opportunities to explore these academic interests in English by developing their self-directed academic literacy for engaging with content in English. By that, we mean students being able to choose issues of interest to them to research, discuss with other students, and present on or write about, so that they can learn together about these issues in English.

Two examples of the courses in the programme—and the kind of issues students look at on the courses—are *Basic Research and Discussion* and *Multicultural Japan* (see Table 2 below). *Basic Research and Discussion* is an intermediate-level course in which students look at any social, legal, political or global issues they are interested in. *Multicultural Japan* is a more advanced class in which students focus on a particular area of study over a year and choose a number of issues to investigate to build their knowledge and understanding of the field.

Table 2

*Two Courses in the Taught-in-English Programme and Examples of Research Issues Chosen by Students*

<b>BASIC RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION</b>	<b>MULTICULTURAL JAPAN</b>
<b>1st &amp; 2nd year, Intermediate</b>	<b>3rd year, Advanced</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Japan &amp; Tuna Fishing</li> <li>• Junk Food</li> <li>• Developing Countries' Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buraku Problem in Japan</li> <li>• Voting Rights for Korean Permanent Residents</li> <li>• Japanese Identity</li> </ul>

Students research the issues they have chosen, in cycles of three to four weeks. Outside class, they find sources of information for their issue, usually online, and read and make research notes. Each week in class, they explain their research using those notes and discuss it with other students in pairs. They reflect on the development of their understanding through talking with other students but also by writing research diaries. And they also try to focus their research on specific questions which will help them build their knowledge of the issue and, very importantly, develop their understanding of it. At the end of this cycle, they give a presentation with a poster, flip chart or Powerpoint slides to other students.

In contrast to the MA TESOL programme at Nottingham, the development of criticality is not a formal requirement or criterion for grading in the Law Faculty at Chuo, although many members of faculty see it as important. In the Taught-in-English programme, full- and part-time teachers have identified criticality as an important element of students' engagement with content, and this has become an area of discussion in faculty development workshops (also known as *teacher retreats*) for teachers in the programme. Helping students to develop their understanding of an issue, not just gather information about it, has become a crucial part of the programme. We want students to recognise and reflect on their own views on an issue, to engage with different viewpoints that they encounter through research and discussion, and so to develop their own thinking about an issue with other students. This is the notion of criticality that we are working with.

### **Why Focus on Developing Criticality and Learner Autonomy?**

To think more about the development of criticality and autonomy in the Taught-in-English programme, I will draw on interviews with four students, starting with Saori, a first-year student in the *Basic Research and Discussion* class. Explaining her research in one cycle of the

course, Saori brings out some of the ways that learner autonomy relates to development of a critical understanding about an issue.

*Saori: I'm interested in the fourth project about farmers of tobacco leaf. There are many farmers of tobacco leaf in Tanegashima, Kagoshima—my hometown... At that time, the Democratic Party of Japan said they will raise the price of tobacco. The topic, tobacco tax is very close to us, so that is very interesting for me... Following the connections, I researched various things: first, the danger of tobacco, second, the tax of tobacco and third, JT [Japan Tobacco] and tobacco farmers... I learnt many things but first tobacco tax is very high because half of the price of tobacco is tax. At first I thought simply tobacco farmer is unfortunate. During the project I think to protect tobacco farmers is a very good thing but that makes foreign people's health bad. In my presentation, I said, "There's a contradiction there. I'm not on one side or the other". That was interesting for my audience.*

Three points are important here. One is that Saori brings her own interests—concerns that are literally very local—into the classroom and into her research. The second is the way she actively self-directs the development of her research not just to develop her knowledge, but to bring in new viewpoints and see this issue from different perspectives. And the third point, very interestingly, is that Saori is not rushing to give her own opinion, or to present an argument, in the way that is advocated in some approaches to critical thinking. She is holding the issue open, and presenting it from different sides, an approach that she finds is interesting for the students listening to her presentation. Saori's case suggests, then, some ways that learner autonomy and criticality intersect that are useful to consider more.

### **What Are the Connections Between Criticality, Learner Autonomy and Identity in the Taught-in-English Programme?**

Let me take up the crucial question of interest first. When students on courses such as *Basic Research and Discussion* or *Multicultural Japan* self-direct their work in English in terms of their own interests and experiences, we start to see what Douglas Barnes has referred to as the interaction between *school knowledge* ("the knowledge which someone else presents to us") and *action knowledge* ("that view of the world on which our actions are based") (Barnes, 1992, p. 81). So, when students bring their own concerns and questions to the knowledge they encounter in universities, they can start to make that knowledge their own, to use it to author their own understandings of the world. As David Little (1991, pp. 11-12) has suggested, this engagement between action knowledge and school knowledge is at the heart of learner autonomy.

Two other principles of language learner autonomy also support criticality as students develop their understandings of the world in the Taught-in-English programme. One is that students are not just language learners but are also active users of the language for learning and communicating about issues of concern to them (Little, 2000, pp. 15-16; Benson, 2002, pp. 15-17). The other principle is part of the political approach to learner autonomy (Benson, 1997) and emphasizes the right of learners to decide the content of their learning, and to use language for their own reasons and purposes. This quote from Yuto, a third-year student on the



*Multicultural Japan course*, gives a good sense of how his active, purposeful use of English relates to the development of his thinking about an issue.

**Yuto:** *I'm very interested in the environment. In [Taught-in-English classes], we can choose topics relatively freely, so we can pick up interesting topics and I enjoy researching.... For example, I researched about developing countries' environmental and human rights. Before researching that, I didn't think it was a serious problem. After researching that I felt it was very, very serious problem in developing countries. About air pollution, almost every air pollution country is a developing country.... So how to solve this problem? What's the role should developing countries play? And developed countries? What should developed countries do to solve that? I researched about law related to the environment.*

Notable here is the way that Yuto identifies problems for himself, focusing on areas and questions that will drive his knowledge forward, and suggesting that problem-setting is important for this kind of criticality. Douglas Barnes captures well this relationship between developing our understandings of the world and a purposeful, autonomous approach to learning: “We educate children in order to change their behaviour by changing their view of the world. We want to change the way they perceive the world they live in, not so they will carry out our purposes, but so they can formulate their own purposes, and estimate their value” (Barnes, 1992, p. 80).

Questions of identity are also salient here. As learners bring school knowledge and action knowledge together in learning about issues of interest to them, they are also integrating their identities as students with their identities in the wider world outside the classroom. And they are developing identities as language users who can decide the content of their own learning in that language. The importance of this sense of their own interest, purpose and control in language use is made clear—by its absence—when we consider ways in which autonomy may not promote the development of criticality.

### **In What Ways Can Learner Autonomy Limit Criticality?**

When students do not have an active and purposeful engagement with an issue, their learner autonomy may become instrumental. They make choices about issues to research and sources of information to read because they are required to by the teacher, rather than in terms of their own interests and concerns. So, under these conditions, their choices lack motivation and meaning. Students are being autonomous because they are required to be, completing tasks for the course rather than exploring their interests in the world. The result is often a recycling of common knowledge about a topic. Students researching smoking, for example, often gather information about its harmful effects on health, confirming what they already knew, but not going beyond this in the way that Saori did, in her research on tobacco farming and tax, to encounter new problems and perspectives. As a result, this instrumental autonomy does not encourage or support criticality as an engagement with alternative perspectives and the development of new understandings about the world.

## **How Can We Help Students Engage With Alternative Ways of Thinking?**

On the Taught-in-English programme, we have tried to provide research resources that enable students to encounter different viewpoints and arguments about an issue. Many teachers stress that students should consider the interests and perspectives of different actors involved in an issue. Like some other teachers, I have also tried giving mini-presentations that raise awareness of different approaches to a topic. But, whilst students generally find all of these interesting and helpful, what they say is most useful for developing their understanding of issues is talking with other students, exchanging ideas, hearing about other research. In other words, it is a process of co-constructing ways of thinking that is important for the development of their criticality. Central to this is “exploratory talk” (Barnes, 1992), the kind of talk that explores issues, looks for different angles, brings in different opinions, rather than trying quickly to reach a conclusion or just demonstrate knowledge. It also involves “interthinking” (Mercer, 2000), thinking with other people, rather than just inside our own heads. This then relates clearly to another principle of learner autonomy, that of interdependence. So there are synergies between criticality and autonomy in forms of discourse—exploratory talk and interthinking—and kinds of relationships—interdependent and collaborative—which support each other. Satomi and Midori, third-year students on the *Multicultural Japan* course, highlight this:

**Satomi:** *It's important to have a discussion with classmates not just report back on research because it helps finding new points of the research, another viewpoint, or another aspect for the issue. For me it's useful—thinking together and talking together.*

**Midori:** *“What does this mean to you?”, “Why do you choose this topic?” From these questions, I can consider why I choose this issue, how it relates to my interest, I can find my focus point and I can tell the stories from my experiences.*

Satomi suggests how interthinking—“thinking together and talking together”—can help students move beyond their current understandings to new ones. Midori talks about the way that exploratory talk, in the form of questioning, can help her not only to think about and focus her research but also to tell the stories of her experience. She is researching Japanese identity and thinking back to her experiences during a homestay in Australia when people asked her what it meant to be Japanese and she started to wonder about that issue. And so these stories can now come into her critical understanding of the world.

Interestingly, Satomi and Midori told me that their way of talking together, and questioning each other, had actually developed in classes in their first and second years, in which the teachers had emphasised the importance of critical thinking and particularly of asking each other critical questions. We see here then how the kind of criticality we aspire to in the Taught-in-English programme may develop out of a more specific kind of critical thinking when students use it as part of their own self-directed, interested, and purposeful engagement with content.

### **Criticality, Critical Thinking and Autonomy Across Different Contexts**

To continue, we want to bring in a more theoretical framework for thinking about criticality, critical thinking and autonomy in different contexts. By contexts, we are referring both to the programmes at Nottingham and Chuo, but also to the way that specific academic practices, such as assignment writing, constitute microcontexts for criticality and autonomy within programs and institutions.

#### **Forms of Criticality**

The first approach we find useful is taken from Ron Barnett's work on criticality in UK higher education (Barnett, 1997; see also Johnston et al., 2011). Barnett has identified three kinds of criticality, or three ways of being critical, that relate to formal knowledge, the self, and the world:

- Critical reason—being critical about formal knowledge = critical thinking?
- Critical self-reflection—being critical about our own beliefs and ideas, experiences and practices.
- Critical engagement (action)—being critical about the world and our place in it.

For Barnett, critical thinking is a form of critical reason because it is concerned with formal knowledge. He suggests that a broader form of criticality, critical being, involves the integration or interaction of all these ways of being critical. Here, there are clear parallels with the interaction between school knowledge and action knowledge. There are also echoes, in Barnett's work, of the concern from Henri Holec and the Council of Europe, during the formative period for autonomy in language learning in the late 1970s, that learner autonomy should carry over from formal education into other areas of life (Little, 1991, pp. 6-7). Barnett's approach, then, not only helps to make sense of the difference between critical thinking and criticality, but enables us to see that we have a common concern at both Nottingham and Chuo with developing critical thinking into a broader kind of criticality, in which students integrate formal knowledge with other teaching contexts and the world beyond the classroom.

#### **Levels of Criticality**

The second approach that may be useful for thinking about criticality and autonomy is concerned with levels of criticality and students' development in terms of those. Barnett's model involves four levels of criticality, but it is useful to focus on one here: the instrumental level. The key point about this is it is other-directed, with tasks imposed on learners, not self-directed. These tasks might require learners to reflect on themselves in terms of criteria set by their teacher not by themselves, or to do an assignment in which they have to be critical because the teacher tells them to. This instrumental kind of criticality is often related to using certain skills or techniques, so Barnett would locate critical thinking skills very much in this area. Here we can see a parallel with instrumental autonomy, in which there is a similar lack of

purpose and control on the part of learners who make choices because that is what is required of them. Again, there is a common concern at Nottingham and Chuo with moving beyond instrumental criticality to a kind of criticality that involves control and agency—elements of an active, purposeful learner autonomy—as well as critical stance and voice, as a way of students expressing their own view of the world.

A framework of types and levels of criticality, based loosely on Barnett, offers, then, a way to understand a process of development from critical thinking around formal knowledge into a broader criticality that also addresses the self and the world, as well as a parallel development from an instrumental level of criticality to a more agentic one. But we should also ask if the development of criticality is really a linear development, a smooth path that students move along in a predictable pattern.

### **Criticality and Autonomy as Social Practices: Learning Circles, Classes and Assignments**

We want to suggest that an alternative might be to see criticality and autonomy as socially situated practices. This approach to criticality and autonomy draws on the New Literacy Studies and its understanding of literacies as historically and socially specific practices (see, for example, Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). It foregrounds the ways that criticality and autonomy—and the kind of identities, discourses and relationships that they involve—will take different forms in different social contexts. The contexts we are thinking of here are the learning circles at Nottingham that Richard has mentioned, as well as the taught classes for the modules and electives, and the written assignments on which they are assessed. The learning circles are significant because this is where the students get together in groups, and ask themselves: What is this all about? What does this mean to me? Here, they can really work through issues from the course and try to relate them to different contexts. So the learning circles are a very important part of the programme and one that does not exist in other MA TESOL programmes that we know of.

Learning circles consist of three to five students meeting without a teacher present, so the students are in control of the pace and structure of their discussions. In contrast, in the classes that students take, especially the required modules, there are about 20 students and the teacher structures the class, usually around a Powerpoint presentation with short breaks for student discussion. One issue that the students raise is their ability to relate formal knowledge to their teaching contexts and practices in these two contexts. Whereas they feel they can do that quite effectively in learning circles, in classes, especially early in the course, they feel they have less chance to do that so well. According to one student, Betty:

**Betty:** *In our class, we just talk academic things. [But in learning circles] we have to talk about the theoretical part and discuss about our experiences in learning and teaching ...So it's like between daily and academic talking...first we have to express it academically and help each other if there is misunderstanding or unclear part. Then we move to our experiences.*

Another issue here is students' identities and their sense of their own ability to be critical. In classes, students, especially those with limited teaching experience, often worry about their right to be critical, wonder what expertise or authority they have for that, and feel nervous because there are "experts" in the class—other students and the teacher who know more than them. But in learning circles they become quite critical with each other and see that as helpful.

**Betty:** *While discussing in learning circles, if I have some misunderstanding about theoretical part, other girls just warn me, "No, it's not like this. It should be like this..." I don't feel myself sad or bad when they said something like that because, I don't know, they just try to help me.*

One more comparison, which is really important, is between assignments and learning circles. The programme at Nottingham is assessed entirely on assignments, and demonstrating criticality in those assignments is therefore very important. But, again according to Betty, the form of criticality that is possible or necessary with a written assignment is very different from that which develops in the learning circles.

**Betty:** *While writing [assignments] I'm the only one who looks at the topic from one perspective. Maybe I cannot see the other perspectives but in learning circles it is totally different. If there are four people then it means in a learning circle there are four different ideas or maybe one basic idea but we can all improve from different sides.*

In this description of the learning circles, we get a picture of interdependence and interthinking, and of new viewpoints and understandings developing through discussion, that echo the accounts of the way that students develop their criticality through dialogue and questioning in the Taught-in-English programme at Chuo. It is this kind of exploratory criticality, which integrates knowledge, the self and the world, and that interacts dynamically and dialectically with the development of learners' autonomy, that we are most interested in supporting. However, we also recognize that critical thinking concerned with formal knowledge is valuable and can develop into broader forms of criticality, and that specific institutional contexts and academic practices, such as individual written assignments, may require particular forms of criticality to be used. A social practices approach, which considers the varying forms that criticality takes in different contexts, addresses the kinds of differences that Betty points out. It raises questions about the intersections between the different practices of criticality in an institution, as well as about the relations between autonomy and criticality in those practices. It is these questions that we turn to now at the end of this paper.

### **Questions for Further Research Into Practices of Criticality and Autonomy**

We have seen that students on the MA TESOL at Nottingham report significant overall development in their own critical thinking, in their ability to evaluate research in terms of their teaching contexts, to take a critical stance, and find their own voice. We have also looked at how criticality takes different forms in different academic sites and processes such as learning circles, seminar classes, and written assignments. A key question, then, is how the Nottingham students see the connections—or dissonances—in the development of their

criticality across the whole programme and over the course of the year. Extending this kind of inquiry to the Law Faculty at Chuo would mean looking at how the development of criticality in the Taught-in-English programme relates to expectations within the Faculty about students' being critical in the rest of their law, politics and business classes, some of which are seminar-type classes that involve students making presentations and writing reports but most of which are exam-assessed lecture courses.

The particular forms that criticality tends to take in the learning circles at Nottingham, and how these relate to other parts of the programme, is a significant area for further research, because the learning circles are a distinctive feature of the Nottingham course but not of other MA TESOL programmes in the UK. And whilst it is perhaps easier to track the emergence of a focused critical stance and a willingness to critique the “experts” in student assignments than in learning circles, it is also useful to understand the contribution that more exploratory and collaborative types of criticality can make to students' capacity to reflect critically on their own teaching practices and contexts. The emphasis on self-direction also makes the learning circles a key site for investigating the interactions between learner autonomy and criticality. Similarly, the Chuo programme raises questions about the synergies and tensions between learner autonomy and an exploratory, independent type of criticality—but this time in a classroom context and with undergraduate students—particularly between students self-directing their research and taking a critical stance to the knowledge that they encounter.

The importance of written assignments on the Nottingham programme provides an urgent reason for students there to develop their criticality. At the same time, it limits to one particular academic practice the formal assessment of students' ability to take a critical stance and reflect critically on their contexts. Recognising this, Richard has been considering the possibility of expanding the assessment on the Nottingham programme to include digital storytelling, a genre that seems likely to encourage the development of a personally engaged critical voice more than written assignments do. Here, then, an understanding of the different forms that criticality takes can feed back into practices of academic assessment, so that different, and perhaps more autonomy-friendly, forms of criticality can also be valued and evaluated. Mike and other colleagues at Chuo would also like to explore digital storytelling as a way for students to present their own self-directed research about the world as well as to reflect critically on their own histories and experiences. How this emerging practice of digital academic literacy supports the interdependent development of learner autonomy and criticality is one more question for future research.

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**Richard Pemberton.** See p. 95-99.

**Mike Nix** works in the Law Faculty at Chuo University. His teaching and research there are focused on helping students develop self-directed, critical and multimodal forms of academic literacy for learning in English about social, political, legal and global issues of interest to them. He has also done research recently at the University of Nottingham, with Richard Pemberton and others, on autonomy, criticality and the ownership of English in the development of academic literacy by international MA students.

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