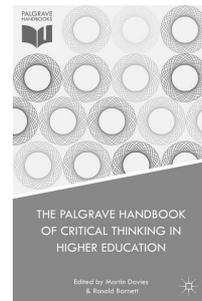# Think critical; be critical

The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education by Martin Davies & Ronald Barnett (Eds).

ISBN: 978-1-137-37803-3 (hbk), Palgrave MacMillan, New York, x + 636 pp., 2015.

Reviewed by Dennis Bryant

I must congratulate Palgrave MacMillan on a Handbook that presents well and is a delight to read. I make these laudatory remarks for a number of reasons which I will share with you now.

The division of the Handbook into seven sections was, I think, judicious and projects a feeling of balance. The sections are entitled 'What is Critical Thinking in Higher Education'; followed by 'Teaching Critical Thinking'; then, in Section III, 'Incorporating Critical Thinking in the Curriculum'; followed by 'Critical Thinking and Culture'; then 'Critical Thinking and the Cognitive Sciences' in Section V. The final two sections are 'Critical Thinking and the Professions'; and, lastly, 'Social Perspectives on Critical Thinking'.

Sections average five papers, and about half the papers are written by multiple authors. In total, there are about 70 authors, which suggests to me that the papers might be well-prepared, and representative. However, I did not at any time presume that this would be the outcome, and therefore I must relate my approach in reviewing this book.

As a first step, I went to the section that most interested me, this was Section III, and I began with the first paper, which was The Relationship between Self-Regulation, Personal Epistemology, and Becoming a 'Critical Thinker': Implications for Pedagogy, by Iris Vardi.

In reading this almost-randomly chosen paper, I had an agenda, in two parts. You might be surprised that I did not begin with the Editors' Introduction. However, in recent times, I have encountered a surfeit of hyperbole from editors, and did not want to revisit the scene. However, I was later to discover that the Handbook's Editors were masters, not of spin, but of superbly written understatement, and fluent argument; but at that time, I was not taking chances. I wanted to dive into the 'real' papers, so to speak.

The second part of my agenda for selecting the Vardi paper concerned my own background. I have never been fully up to date with 'Critical Thinking', which I note is usually abbreviated to simply CT. So, I was searching for a paper that would inform me. I am pleased to report that I was not disappointed in any regard. The Vardi paper was extremely informative as well as being written and structured to an academic standard up with which I was very happy to put (to paraphrase an old line from Winston Churchill).

Apart from the Iris Vardi paper and the Editors' Introduction, I carefully read just two further papers. In selecting these papers, I was guided by a principle of trying to stick with papers that seemed immediately relevant to student life. For example, I did not choose any papers from the 'Social Perspectives' section, or from the 'Professions' section. Perhaps, I erred?

I did review Using Argument Mapping to Improve Critical Thinking Skills by Tim van Gelder, from the 'Teaching' section and was introduced to mapping. I then looked up 'mapping' in the Index, and scanned through papers where it was mentioned – after all, it is a Handbook!

Being convinced of the Handbook's quality, but having not reviewed a multi-author paper, my final review was Applying Cognitive Science to Critical Thinking among Higher Education Students by Jason Lodge, Erin O'Connor, Rhonda Shaw and Lorelle Burton, from the 'Cognitive Sciences' section.

The Lodge *et al.* paper was interesting in that it addressed a number of themes. As one example, the authors noted that debates have centred on whether CT should be taught in a general or specific manner; however, they concluded that this debate is passé and not the most important debate to entertain. Instead, they proceeded to point out the appeal, and the application to universities, of more current research into Cognitive Science, which they claimed will help remove student-derived faulty thinking such as fallacies, compromising mental shortcuts in thinking, biases, as well as heuristics and, in this way, will succeed in enhancing students' critical thinking capacities. The examples given to support their claims are

relevant not to students alone, but to anyone who thinks.

As a final point, I must ask a question: What was the drive that convinced the Editors to produce this impressive Handbook?

The authors explain their many reasons, lucidly and unemotionally, but the one that caught my eye concerned the university as an historical image of Western education and thought. When the authors evoked this image, it was against a backdrop of universities being overly associated with the Business world's goals and less with traditional university goals.

The inference is that it is time to restore the Western education image by protecting the university's role in developing Critical Thinkers. Admirable and not without logic, I'd say.

Dennis Bryant is concerned with literature that can inform the Academy, especially literature based on empirical observation, believing such knowledge has the potential to expand teaching effectiveness which, in turn, has the potential to expand student Learning success.
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