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ABSTRACT

In this conceptual paper I present an argument from a critical theoretical perspective that it is the role of all universities to enable students' criticality development. Considering criticality development as 'critical being', I argue that higher education needs to focus less on what students know and more on how they can enact the knowledge, skills and competencies they develop, and their critical engagement with the world they inhabit. To do this, I suggest reframing curriculum with an ontological focus to consider students' development in domains beyond knowledge promoting their critical engagement with themselves, others and the world through active learning. I outline a framework that promotes students' holistic development moving from 'knowing', through 'becoming', to 'being' emphasising dialogue, peer diversity and the exchange of differing perspectives in learning and teaching – what I term 'contexts of difference' – to stimulate criticality towards transformatory critique.

Introduction

I begin this paper by sharing my own position as an academic and author to explain my view and experiences of higher education as a student and educator to contextualise the argument that follows. My core argument is for the transformation of university curricula towards an ontological, holistic focus on students and their development as critical persons. At present higher education is largely focused on students' development of knowledge, skills and competencies to prepare them for employment and to contribute to the economy, rather than society more broadly (Nieminen and Yang 2023; Marginson 2024).

My position is guided by my experience as a student in developing criticality. I navigated an uneven and messy path toward criticality amidst a limited focus on and discussion of critical thinking in the curriculum I studied and much of the teaching I experienced. Despite this, through elective study I discovered the power of critical thought, transforming my understanding of and engagement with the world. Later when teaching in universities I observed the evident difficulty amongst students in

developing the criticality expected of them. Coupled with this, my work supporting academic staff revealed their difficulty in articulating what they view as critical thinking and sharing this with students as well as the limited ways in which this is expected to be demonstrated by students in the curriculum. This led to an interest in criticality development in higher education underpinned by my early engagement with critical theory through the work of the Frankfurt School and my introduction to critical pedagogy through authors such as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. I believe that higher education has a social responsibility and should be for the common good, an end in itself rather than simply a means to an end. Universities, in my view, should contribute to society by enabling the development of educated, empowered critical citizens equipped to engage with and contribute to the world and help address the complex challenges we face.

I pursed this interest through doctoral research motivated by experiences and concerns I hold and problems I see from my present position as an academic and critical educator, these form the key aspects of my argument. I contend that the conception of criticality that informs the curriculum (arguably policy-led) and the extent of the scope of criticality in learning, teaching and assessment is limited. Often confined to demonstrations of critical analysis, reflection or evaluation within written assessment and focussed on the individual in relation to knowledge. Arguably there needs to be a broader conception of criticality and one which positions students in relation to each other, society and their possibilities for being in the world.

My argument is compounded by the neo-liberalisation, marketisation and massification of higher education which means that higher education is seen through a consumerist lens, with curricula focussed on developing students' employability (Marginson 2024). The focus in education then is on the individual rather than society more broadly and their ability to challenge and change the world as it is. To achieve this, I suggest there needs to be a broader conception of criticality in higher education and its position and role in student learning and development. My research in this area provides a foundation for my thinking and the arguments I advance here (Graham 2022). I now move to discuss Barnett's (1997) thesis of critical being as a seminal framework informing my own thinking before advancing to the core argument of this paper, for the ontological reframing of curricula to fulfil the key educational aim of student criticality development.

Ronald Barnett's (2022) concept of critical being is the key theory underpinning my argument for advancing the role of higher education in relation to critical thinking and student development. Barnett's view of critical thinking as 'criticality ' – as he rephrases it – considers the whole person and their process of becoming a critical being through developing capacities in critical reason, critical reflection and critical action – what he labels three forms of criticality. Barnett proposes four levels of criticality from 'critical skills' through to 'transformatory critique' aligning with the three forms of criticality and their three domains of expression – knowledge, self and world (see 1997, 103). In this way, Barnett visualises the whole person having the potential to become a critically engaged member of society capable of 'transformatory critique' of knowledge and 'collective reconstruction of' themselves, and the world (1997).

Of significance for my argument is Barnett's call to extend the conception and scope of critical thinking in the academy and the contexts in which it is applied, outside the academy and beyond the epistemological domain. Barnett's thesis for a higher education for critical being founded on the notion of the student as a person carries through to the

'engaged curriculum' conception (Barnett and Coate 2005) where what students know, what they can do, and how they act are proposed to frame curricula design. Barnett's argument for criticality persists 25 years on from this seminal 1997 text, arguing recently that 'the idea of critical thinking has to be revisited and radicalised' (Adams and Barnett 2022, 14) to prepare graduates for a 'world of (ontological) contingency and (epistemic) contestability' (19). This brings me back to my argument for a curriculum with a student focus requiring a shift in philosophy and pedagogy, beyond epistemology to provide the conditions and means for students to move beyond knowing, towards becoming and being critical persons. I shall move to this discussion after briefly exploring critical thinking literature considering the central thesis of my argument.

As with many concepts in higher education, distinct definitional difficulties exist in relation to critical thinking. Often seen as signifying the 'higher' in higher education (Danvers 2018, 549) and as a 'major and enduring' (Johnston et al. 2011, preface) concept and a fundamental goal of university study, critical thinking and students' development as critical thinkers remains 'conceptually and empirically unclear' (Johnston et al. 2011). This lack of clarity in conceptual terms of what critical thinking is and ought to be in universities and how students develop critically leads to serious questions as to critical thinking's place in the curriculum and how students can be brought into the process of developing critically through learning and teaching. Problems relating to critical thinking in the academy persist with a vagueness on what critical thinking is, and how its development among students is realised (Blair 2019). Davies suggests 'universities should be paying more attention to critical thinking and doing a lot more to cultivate it' (2019, 25). In my view, universities practise an innocuous form of critical thinking as a transferable skill to produce competent and compliant graduates who are compatible for employability in the labour market. Instead, to achieve a quality of transformatory critique within learners, I propose a need to reframe the curriculum and our practice as educators to better reflect this aim and the nuances of our learners as humans in their journey towards becoming critical beings (Barnett 1997).

Given the significance of critical thinking for higher education (HE) there is a need to explore this concept and its possibilities for student development further. Davies (2015) charts developments in critical thinking in HE, moving from a normative conception related to skills in argumentation and reasoning towards more sociological, politically informed conceptions viewing individuals not only in relation to knowledge but their relations with others and engagement in the world. The cognitive skills-based conception is where higher education is predominantly situated internationally, seen in qualification frameworks through to learning outcomes stating in quite narrow and technical terms what students will learn, predominantly in the context of knowledge.

Quite simply, the concept of critical thinking is arguably principally conceived within higher education as a rational process and means for logical problem solving, a form of epistemological development, and a transferable skill. This normative, traditional view is arguably insufficient for the needs of contemporary learners to develop the required knowledge, skills and competencies to critically engage with the supercomplex world they inhabit (Barnett 2000, 2004); a world characterised by 'contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability' (Barnett 2000, 415). Such a world requires a move beyond an epistemological and skills focussed curriculum to an ontologically focussed curriculum (Dall' Alba and Barnacle 2007), one that views students as critical persons

in developing across three domains of knowledge, self and world. This views centres on students developing – through a process of becoming to be and act critically – to effectively engage in a world characterised by supercomplexity.

I argue a more educationally transformative concept is needed to re-conceptualise and extend the notion and position of critical thinking in universities, along with the subsequent role of universities in facilitating criticality development to progressively influence and transform society. The conception of criticality as proposed by Barnett (1997) holds such possibility, moving from an epistemological focus to an ontological one, from skills to dispositions and actions. Its key departure from standard views of critical thinking is its extended scope, focussing on the development of students as whole persons and adding the domains of 'self' and 'world' to complement 'knowledge'. Critical thinking, therefore, is a necessary constituent of criticality but it is not sufficient to capture the extended considerations of criticality (Davies and Barnett 2015; Adams and Barnett 2022). Using criticality as a noun instead of an adjective 'through the suffix *ality* means that the condition of being critical (i.e. criticality) should be understood as a process in the making, a continuous process of becoming' (Simpson 2020, 4). Dunne (2015) captures this demarcation of criticality from critical thinking, explaining that:

> criticality, in contrast to critical thinking is not something that is simply 'switched on' or engaged, when a specific topic that requires critical thinking emerges. Rather, criticality as critical being, is inexorably embedded in our everyday activities and experiences, regardless of how mundane they may appear. (92)

When considered in this way, criticality conceptually encapsulates one's thinking, being and acting whereby the individual reflects on their knowledge whilst developing capacities for critical thinking, critical self-reflection and critical action, a consequence of which is their development and embodiment of critical being.

So, what does this mean for students specifically? Rather than adopt the notion that Biesta (2021) argues against learners at the centre in the consumerist sense, I acknowledge that many current HE policy and funding bodies (e.g. Scottish Funding Council, Quality Assurance Agency) determine 'high-quality' learning experiences as those which are student-centred (Quality Assurance Agency 2024) and that put 'students at the heart' (Scottish Funding and Council 2023). However, what this means in practice beyond general statements and principles as set out in the new UK Quality Code and Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) is less clear. I believe these are questions of curriculum and pedagogy, I take these to relate to and engender an aim relative to developing students as critical persons, beyond merely satisfied learners and employable graduates. This requires considering how curricula and learning and teaching approaches both view learners and their development and provide the opportunities for this in pedagogical encounters.

Criticality in the curriculum: empirical insights

Insights from previous research find criticality development to be a dynamic, non-linear process for students. Findings from Johnston et al.'s longitudinal study (2011) suggest the process is complex and contextual with development relating to the individual, a student's previous educational and life experiences, and personal resources. These

authors identified criticality development as a process of socialisation with the co-construction of critical understanding taking place between students and staff via lectures, seminars and group interactions, and through implicit modelling and explicit instruction of critical thinking. Wilson and Howitt (2018) found students developed higher levels of criticality relating to their transformation of understanding, in this case relating to scientific knowledge, where exposure to others' ideas and the beliefs of peers helped students critique their own thinking. Wilson and Howitt (2018, 1165) observed that criticality is best developed through learning and teaching that emphasises 'social dimensions of both the exercise and nature of criticality' claiming higher levels of development are only attained through social forms of learning.

Significant to this discussion and the adopted view of criticality are findings that consider the role of values and ethics in relation to the domains of self and world. For example, Wilson and Howitt (2018, 1170) found that 'ethicality was intertwined with criticality' as students' judgements were seen to be based on ethical as well as reasoned and emotive premises. This thinking aligns with Blakey's (2011) findings that values are significant to criticality development where students realise their own values and subject these to interrogation and re-evaluation. Related to this is additional insight that criticality development results from students realising their own autonomy. Arguably this realisation of autonomy relates to their own positioning in relation to knowledge, which Pu and Evans (2018) found to be a key factor in students demonstrating critical thinking, where students can move from seeing knowledge as static and given to something that is fluid, changeable 'socially sustained and invested with interests' (Barnett 1997, 5).

The insights of these studies connect with findings from my own research in this area (Graham 2022). Proposing an association between students' epistemic beliefs and their conception and development of criticality, I argue that how an individual comprehends and conceptualises critical thinking is the preliminary stage of their criticality development and – like Baxter Magolda (1993, 1994, 1996) – that this is entwined with one's epistemological perspective. This is akin to the conception of epistemic agency (Nieminen, Haataja, and Cobb 2024) where students develop an awareness or actualisation of their agency towards, and contribution to, knowledge with the view to realising their 'transformational relationship with knowledge' (3). Arguably, how students view themselves in relation to knowledge and the realisation that knowledge is or maybe contested, challenged and created by them (especially within the 'soft' disciplines) can signify the awareness of their own autonomy, providing enabling conditions for students' development and demonstration of criticality (Halx and Reybold 2017; Pu and Evans 2018; Salvi 2020; Graham 2022).

As the research literature reveals, criticality development in HE is a complex process that is embodied, affective, contextual and one that extends beyond notions of critical thinking as a simple, linear process of skill development (Johnston et al. 2011; Fakunle, Allison, and Fordyce 2016; Danvers 2016a, 2016b; Wilson and Howitt 2018; Salvi 2020). The seminal finding of most studies discussed is the prevalence of a social element where peer and social interaction within learning situations supports criticality development through various means, including class discussion, group work and student-tutor discussions. This sociocultural dimension, which Barnett (1997) states to be a condition for criticality development, emerges as a significant finding with research suggesting dialogic, participative, active learning contributes to student criticality development across disciplines (Yu et al. 2013; Wilson and Howitt 2018; Graham 2022).

For example, Yu et al. (2013) found that problem-based learning enhanced nursing students' development of critical thinking dispositions. Wilson and Howitt (2018) discovered that a cross-disciplinary science course consisting largely of group activities and discussions enabled high levels of criticality development. Similarly, my own research with international master's students studying education, social sciences and midwifery programmes identified that active learning formats allowing discussion with diverse peers where the sharing of differing perspectives facilitated their higher learning and criticality development (Graham 2022). I termed this emphasis on dialogue and active interaction between individuals sharing their differing views, experiences and perspectives as 'contexts of difference' (Graham 2022). These 'contexts of difference' describe learning situations involving an interaction of dialogue, diversity of the student corpus and their sharing of their different perspectives, views and experiences, providing ideal conditions for criticality development (Graham 2022). Salient to this notion is students' engagement with 'otherness' in terms of experiences, beliefs and perspectives of their peers which they encounter through activity and dialogue. Parks' (2019) findings support this contention relative to the role of differing perspectives and diversity in enabling criticality development. Parks identified a connection between intercultural competence and criticality, where critical cultural awareness was a significant factor enabling students' development in all three domains of critical being – knowledge, self and world. This finding supports Phipps and Gonzalez's (2004) conception of 'intercultural being', which emphasises difference and intercultural engagement as key to 'being in the world' (124). They state that learning 'is not about the absorption of pre-existing truths but about testing and exploring ideas in and against reality, and then reflecting upon the process' (2004). These positions suggest that pedagogical situations where students encounter and engage with difference or otherness can enable criticality development.

Such insights support the efficacy of adopting the whole person view of criticality development as critical being proposed by Barnett, outlining the need to emphasise the availability of such opportunities for students through curriculum and pedagogical encounters. To be able to achieve such an aim, explicit attention is required in considering how curriculum can provide such opportunities for students to progressively engage with and develop within the three domains of knowledge, self and world. Emphasising a whole person, multi-dimensional view of student development allows greater thought to what and how students come to know, to become and to be critical persons through their programmes of study. Thus, prompting educators to consider who our students are, what they bring with them, what support they may need, and the learning, teaching and assessment activities conducive to their development, whilst contemplating how a relational approach can be taken in supporting and working with students in this potentially transformative journey.

Student focus in curriculum

A student focus in learning, teaching and assessment starts with the curriculum and how educators consider learners in their design of programmes. As Wilson and Howitt (2018) suggest, student criticality development is both social and relational in nature. To ensure a real student focus it is important to see curriculum development beyond a procedural,

academic exercise of programme design to engage in meaningful critical reflection. To do this, criticality also needs to extend to educators in an 'action-oriented form of critique' that McArthur suggests we engage in (see Luckett and Bhatt 2024, 6). This is then a critical discomfort towards action, a type of action-oriented critique of our own discourses and practices in learning, teaching and assessment which can take place in curriculum development. To do this, it is important that we see the curriculum not as 'content that should be mastered, but precisely as the multitude of ways through which students can encounter the world and can encounter themselves' (Biesta 2021, 72). The development of students' criticality therefore must begin with staff. Too often the design and development of new programmes and modules takes the form of a technical exercise in planning content. These discussions can become more about the engineering of an often unconsidered, archetypal student norm towards a set outcome within a predetermined timeframe where time and space for thought and dialogue on design are limited due to pressures and staff workload (Bartholomew and Curran 2017; Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021). Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury (2023, 1851) highlight that curriculum transformation 'require[s] changes to how staff teach and conceptualise the curriculum, shifting from an instrumental view of the curriculum as a set of content to be delivered'. They suggest large-scale curriculum review can be considered as a form of 'transformational learning' involving a 'disorienting dilemma' for staff (Mezirow 1997) with 'discomfort and a strong emotional response an expected part of the process' (Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury 2023, 1851).

From my own experiences leading curriculum development work such discomfort and need for conceptual change amongst colleagues is evident. Without prompting, there is often a lack of discussion as to what curriculum itself is and what the philosophy, purpose and aims of the programme being developed or redesigned are, let alone discussion on the type of learners the programme is being designed for, and the learning and teaching approach prospective learners will engage with. There is often limited thought and critical reflection on the part of colleagues on what they bring to the programme, their motivations, their teaching approach and what learning and teaching in higher education and their subject means to them – the meaning behind what they do and why as teachers. Coupling this is a lack of discussion on what they intend for their learners beyond what they need to know, i.e. who and what students can become through and because of their learning. My experience suggests that discussion and collaboration within the academic team and with those in supporting departments can help facilitate these processes. Bartholomew and Curran (2017) found staff viewed relationships as important to achieving good curriculum design, while Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury (2023) identified 'translators' such as educational developers and learning technologists as being integral to curriculum transformation.

A student focussed curriculum must start with an in-depth consideration of who the learners are for whom the course is being designed for to allow opportunities for their development as critical persons. To realise this, there is a need for curricula to provide students with knowledge, experience and development that 'they didn't ask for' (Biesta 2021, 70), because as teachers, curriculum and its enaction in learning and teaching activities is not about 'giving students what they ask for, but is about engaging, with them, in a process of figuring out what it is they might 'need'' (Biesta 2021). This is, however, a sensitive issue, striking the balance between valuing teachers and teaching,

and focusing on learners and their learning. For example, Biesta challenges what he sees as 'learnification' (Biesta 2010), where too much emphasis is placed on individuals as responsible for their own learning in a neoliberal style of educational governance. He argues that 'quite often students or patients do not really know what they need, and that it is precisely the expertise of the educational or medical professional to define what the student or patient may actually need' (Biesta 2022, 159). He argues that the onus remains on the educator to determine curriculum in terms of what we aim to achieve with students or make possible with them. This is, in Biesta's view, 'the question of curriculum', one seen as 'a trajectory for our students to set out upon' rather than the filling of forms, listing of contents and 'learning outcomes' but rather determining 'a 'course of study'' (2022, 156). To achieve this, I believe colleagues need to be brought into this idea, to take ownership of their 'teacherness' to recognise themselves as teachers in the truest sense; as those who know what to teach and what students need to know and learn, and, possibly, who they can become or be. It is only after having established clarity on the ambitions of what we want our learners to achieve, to develop and to become, that questions of teaching and pedagogy can follow. In this sense, philosophy and purpose must precede pedagogy and practice. Having addressed these ontological curricular-based questions, Biesta (2022, 156) proposes 'we can think meaningfully about the kind of educational relationships that are conducive for this'.

However, academics as educational practitioners are likely to need both space and encouragement in such philosophising, in the realisation of their aims and the consideration of the most appropriate means to support learners and their development, especially outside of the purely cognitive domain of knowing. This, as Gravett (2024, 2) suggests, may be simply due to time as 'educators are often busy practitioners who may (understandably) become reliant on entrenched assumptions, and who may feel that they do not have time to read, question and critique'. However, providing dedicated time and focus allows space for colleagues to come together and engage with one another 'to explore and discuss programme philosophy' (Bartholomew and Curran 2017, 43). In my own experience, facilitated critical reflection and discussion is often a significant enabler bringing colleagues together to explore these challenges and share ideas that can challenge the hitherto established approaches to learning and teaching (and assessment) in their discipline, subject, programme or teaching team.

Stimulating such discussion can extend thinking in curriculum design beyond knowledge to the domains of self and world, encouraging colleagues to consider learners' development as whole persons in relation to one another and themselves as teachers. This chimes with Gravett et al.'s (2021, 5) work on relational pedagogy and emphasis on 'meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective learning and teaching'. Core to this work is the concept of mattering in acknowledging and considering 'the impact of a broader range of actors upon learning and teaching, and to tune into the objects, bodies and spaces that constitute the material mattering of learning and teaching as an *in situ* practice of relationality' (Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021, 6). This emphasis beyond foundational assumptions of curriculum as a body of knowledge, content, outcomes to an organisation of experiences as relational and situated (Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021) prompts an extension of curriculum considerations.

The student focus in this view of curriculum development can be seen through the domains of knowledge, self and world, offering a lens to help realise a relational,

student focus. These three domains of criticality development – which arguably exist in one form or another in many degree programmes – can assist to 'explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness' between learners and teachers, and the human and non-human actors in the curriculum that relational pedagogy promotes (Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021, 5).

The 'knowledge' domain can be seen relative to levels of critical thinking related to ideas, theories and propositions, and deeper epistemological questions; 'self' incorporates stages of critical self-reflection towards 'development of the self and reconstruction of the self' while 'world' extends the focus beyond 'the world of propositional discourse' to expose students to other discourses of the wider, external world in which they are situated with the goal of students reaching a level of 'transformatory critique' (Barnett 1997, 68). Assessment, notably authentic assessment (itself a problematic term with connotations of work and employability, see McArthur (2023), Fawns et al. (2024), Arnold and Croxford (2024)) holds promise for students to learn, develop and practice in this way across and between these domains. For example, Elkington and Chesterton (2024, 14) argue 'authentically future-facing assessment' can offer 'agency to students which helps them to continuously connect what they are learning – ideas to thinking, principles to problems, theory to practice, learning to life'. Nieminen and Yang (2023) call for rethinking assessment as a matter of being and becoming. Taking a similar whole person view of education as students' self-formation (see Marginson 2013, 2024), they argue that assessment can be a tool for supporting 'students' agency in relation to their own formation' (Nieminen and Yang 2023, 1030).

However, much discussion and theorising of higher education curriculum has epistemology as its locus, with a concern related to knowledge rather than broader ontological discussions about our reality and the world within which we, our students and higher education are situated (Barnett 1997; Barnett and Coate 2005). Following Barnett's (1997, 2004, 2009) thesis for the development of students' ontological being, Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007, 683) call for an 'ontological turn' in discussions of learning and teaching arguing for an extended focus on the whole student and their being:

> Rather than treating knowledge as information that can be accumulated within a (disembodied) mind, learning becomes understood as the development of embodied ways of knowing or, in other words, ways-of-being (Dall'Alba 2004, 2005).

The addition of the domains of self and world adds to the conceptualisation of curriculum (including the extra and hidden curriculum) and conversations relating to the design of programmes with academics. This captures Barnett and Coate's (2005) 'engaged curriculum', one focussed on the whole person, where curriculum is viewed as a 'form of engagement' and the design of spaces and opportunities for learning towards the dimensions of knowing, acting and being. This conception of curriculum as the 'formation of human being and becoming' (Barnett and Coate 2005) aligns to the development of critical being. As Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007, 689) contend, 'it is not enough for learners merely to understand new concepts or acquire new skills' rather a curriculum for 'being-in-the-world' or 'critical being' (Barnett 1997), has to be about how 'they are to transform as people, to become architects, psychologists, biologists, etc., who enact ways of being in the world' (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007, 689). To achieve this aim, Barnett and Coate (2005, 3) argue that such a curriculum 'has to be understood as the imaginative design

of spaces where creative things can happen as students become engaged'. Through such imaginative thinking and curriculum design focussed beyond knowledge, there is a requirement 'for educational approaches that engage the whole person: what they know, how they act, and who they are' (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007, 689). Add to this the relationship between teachers and learners and the ways in which they might engage together in teaching and learning activities in more social and applied ways that foster development in domains of self and world and knowledge, and we can more seriously work towards students' development as critical persons.

Knowing, becoming and being

It is my view that this is something yet to be fully realised within many university programmes and their learning and teaching strategies, where unless expressly planned for and practised by colleagues in their teaching approaches such development of students happens by chance. To facilitate this imagining of realms of learning and development, I borrow Barnett's (1997, 2009) terminology of 'knowing', 'becoming' and 'being' to simplify his complex framework of critical being. This allows a focus in curricular planning and discussions of teaching aims or pedagogy to consider not just critical thinking as it relates to knowledge but criticality development across the additional domains of self and world. Using the terminology of 'knowing', 'becoming' and 'being' I believe aids in planning the perceived, holistic development of the critical person in higher education, moving from the lowest-level and knowledge domain to rise through the levels and operate in all three domains and forms of criticality (see Barnett 1997, 103). I use these terms in the way described below, guided by research into criticality development, where these terms best delineated students' stages and levels of criticality development (Graham 2022).

Cognisant that my use of these terms does not entirely replicate Barnett's usage, I define these for the purposes of considering student criticality development as a core aim of curriculum design. 'Knowing' relates to Barnett's (1997, 103) first level of criticality – 'critical skills' – and is largely situated within the domain of knowledge. Though, this understanding of critical thinking is restrained in terms of its scope and application being isolated to the domain of knowledge in relation to students' use in their studies. This categorisation relates to Hammersley-Fletcher and Hanley's (2016, 986) finding of students holding 'an instrumental view of criticality as a tool to help provide an answer or a way through a difficulty'. 'Becoming' encapsulates students' developing criticality – though to Barnett's (1997) lower, intermediate levels – 'reflexivity' and 'refashioning of traditions' – in some, though not all domains simultaneously. This captures the development of critical thinking beyond curriculum content to develop self-reflexivity and applying this in different contexts. 'Being' pertains to Barnett's (1997) vision of critical being where students are developing as critical persons across all three domains and to 'transformatory critique', the highest level of criticality development.

As Barnett proposes, 'knowing and being (and becoming) are linked – but in ways that we have barely begun to comprehend' (2009, 440). But by focusing on students and their development through curriculum design foregrounding criticality as critical being and adopting a staged approach, knowing, becoming and being provides an explicit means to conceptualise and plan students' development through their courses and in their

learning, teaching and assessment. In this way curriculum and its accompanying pedagogical approaches can place emphasis on the development of criticality extending beyond knowledge and skills to include dispositions, as 'without the dispositions to be critical, critical thinking skills are inert' (Adams and Barnett 2022, 15).

Spaces for dialogue, agency and action

I propose that a key enabler of this curricular aim is through a pedagogy of active enquiry-based approaches that privileges dialogue and student agency. Rather than focus on what is taught or covered in teaching and learning spaces or whether this is online or on-campus, it is what happens in those spaces that matters most in terms of student development. It is about bringing students in – teaching not as talking to students but talking with them and they with each other engaging with students in ways that allow them to participate in their own learning and that of others, including their tutors; allowing students to apply the concepts, theories, values they are learning (knowledge and self-knowledge) in forms of critical action. This greater focus on activity in learning – buttressed in student discussion, interaction, collaboration and making and creating – accommodates the desired conditions for student criticality development (Johnston et al. 2011; Wilson and Howitt 2018; Graham 2022). Here dialogue and participation on the learners' part is foregrounded, allowing them to test and share ideas and develop new perspectives and understandings while guided and supported by their teachers. This pedagogy reflects an open-pedagogical situation (Marginson 2013) predicated on dialogic relations where 'learners have both autonomy and responsibility' (Adams and Barnett 2022, 11) where their critical dispositions are elicited in the learning environment established by educators.

In order to realise the dialogic aspect of 'contexts of difference' one has to consider students' characteristics and backgrounds in planning learning activities and when teaching. Differences in students' views, experiences and backgrounds provides the diversity that supports students' sharing of different perspectives. By embracing this diversity as a learning opportunity, educators must accommodate the different needs of the learners, acknowledging individual strengths and support requirements. For example, variations in language abilities, confidence and communication. Here educators should both encourage and support students, guiding yet pushing learners where appropriate.

Active learning can foster criticality development by providing opportunities for students to critically apply their knowledge and engage others and the world. Active learning encompasses teaching scenarios that emphasise student interaction and participation in learning activities which go 'beyond listening, thinking, and notetaking' (Aga 2024, 786). Broadly defined as 'a classroom situation in which the instructor and instructional activities explicitly afford students agency for their learning' (Lombardi et al. 2021, 16), active learning can help meet the aims of the holistic development of students beyond knowledge acquisition by critically engaging students as persons with one another and with their tutors in more dynamic, horizontal relationships. Traditional lectures and tutorials with questions and answer structures often impose hierarchies within learning and dichotomous relations between educators and learners. In research students described lectures as being passive, involving the repetition of set readings, with one student describing lectures of more than one-hundred students as a 'dehumanising experience'

(Graham 2022, 176). Instead, students want opportunities to 'discuss with their peers, exchange views and opinions on readings and topics' (Graham 2022, 177).

Agency appears a key construct in both active learning (Lombardi et al. 2021; Nieminen, Haataja, and Cobb 2024) and criticality development (Barnett 1997; Adams and Barnett 2022), where autonomy and action are emphasised as part of student learning and development. Lombardi et al. (2021) suggest that in 'traditional teacher-centred environments, students could still attempt to exercise agency to construct meaning' (19) though highlight this is less explicit and possibly not authentic. They argue therefore that 'in traditional learning situations, teachers may be the only ones explicitly exercising agency for meaning construction' (Lombardi et al. 2021). This agentic emphasis is also highlighted by Tabrizi and Rideout (2017) who make the connection between active learning and critical pedagogy, noting that both approaches problematise traditional one-directional teacher student relationships. Tabrizi and Rideout claim that while revoking this relationship is not part of active learning 'the effect is the same: requiring students to become active agents of their own learning' where students share their own opinions, discuss with their peers and where the teacher's role becomes 'shared to a lesser degree among the students themselves' (2017, 3206). Similarly, Lombardi et al. (2021) suggest that active learning enables students to 'experience greater levels of autonomy via an environment in which the instructor effectively supports that increased autonomy' (17).

As with the contexts of difference, Barnett (1997) emphasises dialogic interaction and diversity in his three conditions for criticality development. These conditions, he argues, require students' exposure 'to multiple discourses' (167), and 'to wider understandings, questionings and [the] potential impact' (168) of their discipline on society, and a willingness to view their 'own world from other perspectives' (169) and to engage with them. Given that social, participation-based learning presents preferential means for students to develop criticality across the three domains (Graham 2022), I suggest this can be realised through active learning. Active learning engages students in dialogue and collaboration with one another, emphasises the application and extension of knowledge through application to engage students with the world beyond the classroom.

However, crucially, the teacher must create the conditions to allow learners' autonomy, create activities that enable and encourage them to apply their knowledge in various ways extending and transferring this to other contexts, including their own self and their engagement with the world. This is pedagogy adopting heutagogy's principles of self-determination and autonomy (Stoszkowski and McCarthy 2018). Here a crucial onus is placed upon the educator to realise these relationships by providing a scaffold. Relationships between students and educators, students and peers, and students with the world are key. As Adams and Barnett (2022, 12) suggest:

> If criticality is to be brought off, heutagogical principles have to nuance their interest in learner autonomy by allowing for a complex role for the educator, such that criticality stretches beyond self-reflection and self-critique to critique of the *Real* of the world.

Conclusion

I have argued that embracing 'contexts of difference' in the design of learning and teaching experiences and in developing curricula can engage students, their higher order

learning and criticality development in realising active pedagogical approaches that fore-ground dialogue, and therefore student agency. Revising Barnett's (1997) framework of critical being as knowing, becoming and being I believe reduces complexity and better incorporates the development of students as critical persons across programmes of study. Considered this way, students can move from the base-levels and knowledge domain of criticality ('knowing') to rise through the levels and operate in all three domains and forms of criticality ('being'). In this sense students come to know of and begin to engage in critical thinking as a technical skill before becoming critical within domains beyond knowledge and to intermediate levels before potentially developing transformatory critique and realising critical being. Viewed in this way with greater emphasis on the additional domains of self and world can, I believe, prompt a broader view of curriculum emphasising students' own development and engagement with the world in various ways through their learning. Such an ontological focus in curriculum that considers students, and their development more holistically can allow opportunities through learning, teaching and assessment that allow them to become critical persons. Graduates as critical persons as distinct from employable individuals will be prepared to more effectively engage with the complex and uncertain world they live within and will further encounter beyond their studies. There is therefore an onus upon universities as sites of higher learning to ensure our learners can become those resilient people able to take on the world and its complexities.

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