



# Briefing Note

## CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING, AND ASKING QUESTIONS

### Critical and creative thinking

Critical and creative thinking are integral to activities that require students to **think broadly and deeply**. In order to do this, **reason** and **logic** must be used, but so too must **imagination**, **creativity** and **innovation**.

### Defining critical thinking

Although there are many definitions of critical thinking there is consensus that thinking critically involves the following:

- Being able to recognise and develop an argument.
- Using evidence to support an argument.
- Being able to draw reasoned conclusions.
- Using information to identify and provide solutions to complex problems.
- Relating theory to practice.
- Reflecting on the justification of one's own beliefs and values.
- Being able to reflexively consider and evaluate one's own work against the work and views of others.

Specific skills involved in critical thinking include:

- Analysing
- Evaluating
- Explaining
- Reasoning
- Questioning
- Comparing

- Synthesising
- Inferring
- Hypothesising
- Appraising

Importantly, **intellectual independence** is integral to critical thinking.

(Adapted from: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Pdf/Critical-and-creative-thinking>)

## Defining creative thinking

Creative thinking involves students in doing the following:

- Generating and applying new ideas in specific contexts.
- Interpreting information in different ways.
- Seeing existing situations in new ways.
- Identifying alternative explanations.
- Synthesising information to generate different outcomes.
- Refining ideas to discover possibilities. This is sometimes described as 'thinking outside of the box'.

(Adapted from: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Pdf/Critical-and-creative-thinking>)

## Critical and creative thinking in media and communication

More specifically, critical and creative thinking in the relevant discipline areas can be expressed with reference to both the **Australian Qualification Framework (AQF)** and also the **Subject Benchmark Statements of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)**. Using these frameworks core expectations around critical and creative thinking are:

- Engage critically with major thinkers, debates and intellectual paradigms within the field and put them to productive use (*critical thinking*).
- Analyse closely, interpret and show the exercise of critical judgement in the understanding and, as appropriate, evaluation of these forms (*critical thinking*).
- Consider and evaluate their own work in a reflexive manner, with reference to academic and/or professional issues, debates and conventions (*critical thinking*).
- Gather, organise and deploy ideas and information in order to formulate arguments cogently, and express them effectively in written, oral or other forms (*critical thinking*).

- Demonstrate the development of creative ideas and concepts based upon secure research strategies (*creative thinking*).
- Work in flexible, creative and independent ways, showing self-discipline, self-direction and reflexivity (*critical and creative thinking*).

### **Why can critical and creative thinking seem difficult for Chinese students?**

*A typical Chinese undergraduate (via the gao kao) may be well equipped with writing short articles with memory-based historical facts or evidence, but not research-based academic essays; and a typical Chinese university major will be trained to write a wide variety of practical "bureaucratic" genres. Non-Chinese majors, however, who comprise the great majority of Chinese university students, will receive little instruction in Chinese writing and composition once they have entered the university.*

(Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012, p.202)

Chinese students are encouraged to do the following at university:

- Think a lot
- Work hard
- Accumulate knowledge
- Know if something is right or wrong

None of these things, however, necessarily translate into, or require, critical and creative thinking. In fact, practices associated with the above can work against thinking critically and creatively. The following are common practices associated with university learning in China:

- The memorisation of large quantities of information from a prescribed textbook.
- The memorisation of information contained in lectures, handouts or powerpoints.
- The delivery of rehearsed presentations.
- The provision of right / wrong responses to questions.
- The writing of short texts designed for State and bureaucratic purposes.

These practices tend to reflect a style of thinking that, according to Western notions of learning, is often described as passive. This tends to be enacted within a style of learning that is less independent than that encouraged in the West because it is designed primarily to meet the needs of China's government and its bureaucratic institutions (Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2012, p.206).

There is an additional issue for Chinese students, and this relates to the concept of 'face' (See the Briefing Note on **Understanding the concept of face and how this**

**impacts the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian university context**). The word 'critical' may be misinterpreted as implying being argumentative, or negative, towards someone else. This could mean a loss of face and would therefore, need to be avoided.

It can be seen then that there are significant reasons, both academic and social, for critical and creative thinking to be both interpreted correctly, and used appropriately by Chinese students in the Australian university context. In order to do this, Chinese students may need additional support. Academics may need to assist with the clarification of these concepts. They may also need to provide specific support in terms of the requirements of assignments within particular units of work. (See the various materials and learning activities associated with this project.)

For a Chinese student, thinking critically and creatively can, however, be a challenge. The first step is to appreciate that thinking critically, is not just thinking passively and accepting everything as it is presented. It is **thinking actively**, and it involves **asking questions** and **evaluating all forms of information** encountered. This will help broaden perspectives and will support the development of intellectual independence. (Adapted from: <http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/critical>)

### **Asking and answering questions in the Australian university context**

As mentioned above, thinking critically and creatively involves **asking questions of oneself, of others, and of the texts encountered in an academic course**. The questions asked, however, are not easy questions where there is a literal answer (i.e. it is 'right there' in front of you). The questions asked need to involve **higher order thinking**. This means that the asking and answering of questions should be directed at promoting forms of thinking such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating, rather than the remembering of facts and the information provided within lectures and seminars.

Given that in Chinese university contexts, it is not uncommon for only easy questions to be asked in class (often requiring just descriptive answers), in order to protect the face of both teacher and students (Zhi Tan, 2007), the sort of questioning being talked about here can be difficult conceptually and linguistically.

The table below may assist Chinese students with the necessary concepts and associated verbs that are required for questioning and critical and creative thinking.

<p><b>Analysis</b>  Separating material or concepts into component parts so that the organisational structure of a text or data set may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.</p>	<p>Analyses, breaks down, compares, contrasts, deconstructs, differentiates, discriminates.</p>
<p><b>Synthesis</b>  Building a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Puts parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure.</p>	<p>Categorises, combines, compiles, explains, generates, reconstructs.</p>
<p><b>Evaluation</b>  Making judgments about the value of ideas or materials.</p>	<p>Appraises, concludes, critiques, evaluates, explains, interprets, justifies.</p>

(Adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>)

### Note

Kirkpatrick & Xu (2012) have written extensively about China's rich rhetorical traditions. They state, however, that since the 1990s, the development of writing as an academic discipline has not been given sufficient emphasis. They lament the fact that "contemporary Chinese, whether they represent the government or its critics, have failed to create a new rhetorical style suitable for twenty-first-century public and political discourse" (p.205).

## Reference list

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Additional materials and resources are available from  
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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