



# Session

## CRITICAL THINKING AND ARGUMENTATION

At the end of this session, international students will:

- Appreciate the notion of critical thinking and its relationship to argumentation
- Have developed a strategy for thinking critically based on appreciating different points of view
- Be able to identify evidence that will support a reasoned position
- Have built confidence in developing an academic argument
- Have strengthened skills in synthesising

### How and when to use this material

This session introduces students to critical thinking as it is understood within the disciplines of media and communication studies. It identifies concepts and associated verbs that are required for questioning and critical and creative thinking. It involves an activity which sensitises students to different points of view, and provides them with practice in taking and arguing a stance based on supporting evidence.

Sessions which are foundational to this topic are:

- **Reading critically** which gives students practice in identifying levels of reading texts and is a first introduction to thinking critically
- **Organising ideas through summary and synopsis**

Lecturers may find the following Briefing Note useful to support this session:

- **Critical and creative thinking and the asking of questions**

## Introduction

In the Chinese and Australian academic contexts, the term 'critical thinking' is interpreted and practised differently. Therefore, on arrival in Australia, Chinese postgraduate students can find it difficult conceptually and linguistically to understand and become adept at thinking critically in the Western style. Initially, they will enact styles of thinking and learning which, although effective for them in a Chinese learning culture, will probably be more dependent than those encouraged in Australia. Lecturers therefore need to foster critical thinking by developing a course ethos that both models and is conducive to critical reflection, and which develops skills in evidence-based argumentation.

There are two activities in this session. The first briefly identifies what is meant by critical thinking. The main thrust of the second activity is practise in taking a stance (For or Against) based on supporting evidence in an article, and persuasively arguing this position based on evidence. Students will be required to read an article from their unit readings, or use the following pre-reading example.

### Pre-reading and preparation for this session

Reich, Z. 2014. Islands of Divergence in a Stream of Convergence. Comparing the news practices of male and female journalists in Israel. *Journalism Studies*, 15(1), 64-81

If using an article based on a particular unit's reading, then the following questions will need to be amended for relevance.

### Student activity 1: What is critical thinking?

- Ask students to discuss in pairs:

Q1: *What is critical thinking?*

Q2: *Why is it considered to be important in Australian universities?*

- If students seem hesitant to speak out their opinions at this stage, have them write down their answers and place them in a box. Draw out responses and discuss them with the whole class. (Note that this method ensures that student contributions are anonymous and therefore provides encouragement to contribute.)

## Lecturer input

Ensure that students have identified that there is a difference between:

- The commonly held definition of critical thinking as finding fault or disagreeing with another person; and
- The broader, academic meaning which is concerned with *evaluating* information, arguments, and the assumptions or motives which underpin these.

Critical thinking involves:

- Asking questions about:
  - meanings
  - the evidence for those meanings
  - their value or importance
- Presenting the judgements that are derived from such questioning in a persuasive and reasoned argument. An argument uses reasons and evidence to support a point of view so that readers or listeners can be persuaded to agree with you.

To do this, students need to base their thinking and questioning in research, wide reading and consideration of all possible viewpoints. Analysing and synthesising ideas and information into an argument are core skills associated with critical thinking.

Why is critical thinking important to academe in Australia? This is the main way that new knowledge is added to a field. By incorporating processes of critical thinking into postgraduate courses, individuals come to value knowledge, are motivated to question rather than accept what is presented or taken for granted, and thus are able to think for themselves while also recognising the limits of their individual reflections.

## Student activity 2: 'Falsely accused'

To encourage students to start asking questions about what they have heard, tell them that you are going to present a hypothetical scenario that is likely to engage them emotionally, and they will have to identify questions they would want to know in relation to the scenario:

**Scenario:** *The University has been informed that the English language test that students took before coming to Australia was not conducted ethically. The repercussions are that their English-language qualifications are invalid and they do not qualify for admission to their program of studies.*

- In pairs, students should write down questions they would like to ask the university Admissions Office about the statement in regard to the English language test.
- Ask for volunteers to provide answers from the pairs and write these on the whiteboard in a position where they can be referred to later. Ensure responses include:
  - Who says so? And how credible are they?
  - What exactly did they say?
  - Why did they say that? Ulterior motive?
  - What evidence do they have?
  - Are they citing someone else's evidence and, if so, how credible is that?
- Point out that answers to questions such as these can be used to support an argument that persuades listeners or readers (such as the University Admissions Office) to take a particular point of view.
- Highlight that thinking critically involves asking questions and the same questions used in this activity can be used for assessing an academic argument, and also for developing a stance in essay writing.

### Student activity 3: Taking a stance based on evidence

This activity is based on students' prior reading of the example article by Reich (2014) or another reading related to students' unit of study.

- Explain that students will be placed into small groups to discuss a position (For or Against), selected by the lecturer, in relation to the topic:

*Female journalists operate differently from male journalists.*

- Do not allow students to self-select groups or the position; the lecturer should allocate these.
- Draw the below template on the whiteboard or show as a slide (see **Slide: Discussion topic**), and have students copy this as a basis for the exercise.
- In groups, students should discuss their ideas and then combine their evidence to support their stance, for or against, as allocated by the lecturer. Write their ideas and evidence (including references) in the appropriate column.

<i>Female journalists operate differently from male journalists.</i>	
FOR	AGAINST
1. <i>Reason and evidence</i>	1. <i>Reason and evidence</i>
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

- Students to select one or two spokespersons for each group. Lecturer reminds the class that they should be making notes in their framework as each group presents.
- One spokesperson from ONE group representing the FOR position presents one of their ideas using the following structure:
  - *Assertion*, for example: 'I believe that' / 'It is evident that' / 'It is necessary that'
  - *Reason*: 'this is because' / 'this is due to'
  - *Evidence*: 'research suggests that' / 'Reich (2014) states that' / 'Reich (2014) argues that'

- One spokesperson from ONE group representing the AGAINST position presents one of their ideas, using the above structure. Now alternate around the groups according to their stances FOR or AGAINST.
- Half way around the group presentations, the lecturer might want to interject and suggest that students might wish to now respond to some of the earlier points using the following format:

*Response: 'I understand that' / 'I can see your point about ..., but' / 'I know what you mean, but'*

### **Lecturer input**

At this point, it may be worth highlighting that argumentation is like a tennis match where the argument goes back and forth between players. One person puts forward an opinion based on evidence, and then another person responds to that by presenting an alternative (i.e. a counter-argument). And then the first person responds again by referring to the alternative opinion with a rebuttal (a response to a counter-opinion).

- Individually, students should now complete their template based on what they have heard in the presentations, and use their compilation of ideas to frame their stance.
- Point out that in doing this Activity, students have been asking the same questions as those used for Activity 2: 'Falsely accused'. Point to these questions (remaining on the whiteboard) in order to connect the two different exercises in this Session.
- If time, students should now write a paragraph that synthesises both FOR and AGAINST stances in order to argue their selected position. Alternatively, written work could be done during the following week for presentation in the next seminar.

### Lecturer input: Summary

Emphasise to students that critical thinking and argumentation go hand-in-hand and that there are many different ways of thinking critically, and presenting evaluations of evidence in a persuasive and reasoned way. The examination of evidence and debate – as carried out in the above Activity – is a strategy that requires students to be active in questioning and examining their thinking and the thinking of others in order to improve their understanding, and reach the best possible conclusions and decisions.

Critical thinking – as expressed in arguments within essay writing – doesn't just present one side of a topic but also considers and weighs up other viewpoints.

To finish, the lecturer might show how the presentation of evidence from different perspectives fits within the structure of an academic argument or essay format.

### Note to lecturer

Argumentation and reasoning in Western society implies a 'wrestling debate' (Durkin, 2011). There is a tendency towards a doubt orientation. Issues are often framed in adversarial terms, using polarised critique and counter-arguments in order to search aggressively for 'truth'.

This contrasts with a lack of direct confrontation in much Chinese academic thinking and writing which can be described as 'conciliatory dialogue' (Durkin, 2011), i.e. it is based on a belief orientation which tends to value exposition of facts, accommodation of all views, and harmony above a 'search for truth'. This approach is endemic to the Chinese learning context, coupled with the requirement to undertake little written work on undergraduate courses in China, results in students entering Australian postgraduate programs often unfamiliar with Western notions of critical thinking and their expression in persuasive argument. For this reason, lecturers in Australia need to be explicit about what is meant by critical thinking and argumentation in relation to the focus of their media and communication teaching.

Durkin, K. 2011. Adapting to Western Norms of Critical Argumentation and Debate. In Jin, L. and Cortazzi, M. (Eds) *Researching Chinese Learners: Skills, Perceptions and Intercultural Adaptation*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan, 274-291



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