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Individualised and instrumentalised? Critical thinking and the optics of possibility within 'neoliberal' higher education

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the state of critical thinking in higher education's everyday pedagogical encounters, against the backdrop of an increasingly commodified and marketised academy in the UK. Illustrated by observation, focus group and interview data from 15 first-year undergraduate social-science students at a UK research-intensive university, I explore how neoliberal modes of governmentality create, reproduce and legitimate specific forms of critical thinking and critical thinkers. First, I describe how dominant discourses of critical thinking as a commodified 'technology' for assessment rub up against understandings of critical thinking as socio-political protest - using data from students and those teaching them. I then explore the positioning of critical thinking as emotional self-surveillance and unpack the consequences of this politics of *reflection* over *resistance*. Using Barad's notion of the 'apparatus' as a contextualising optic of possibility, I argue that while multiple formations of critical thinking exist within the multifarious possibilities constituting the 'neoliberal' academy, instrumentalised and individualised practices come to matter and are valorised, with pedagogic and political consequences for thinking critically *in* and *about* higher education.

KEYWORDS: *Critical Thinking, Pedagogy, Higher Education, Students subjectivity/ies Neoliberalism, Barad*

Introduction

Critical thinking is a diverse set of knowledge practices involving in-depth questioning and debate that have come to characterise the values and value of university graduates. Whilst deeply embedded in the academy's DNA, this seemingly benign and transparent intellectual value has multiple meanings and enactments. This ranges from the development of a rationalist approach to deconstructing knowledge as a technique for academic assessment, to an ethical or activist stance that becomes aligned with students' approach to their wider lives and studies (Barnett and Davies, 2015; Moore, 2013). How these play out in practice and the nature of the boundaries between these definitions are concurrently shaped by different theoretical imaginaries – from philosophy to a politics of social justice – resulting in further definitional dissensus. While a 'correct' definition of critical thinking does not exist, this does not follow that 'all conceptions of critical thinking are equally good or defensible' (Bailin *et al.,* 1999, p. 286). For example, approaches that presume a decontextualised critical subject who applies a series of 'rational' processes to interrogate truth claims objectively, obscure the complex and contingent nature of higher education learning. Indeed, Fenwick and Edwards (2013) state that knowledge practices in higher education, such as critical thinking, are not fixed or merely cerebral but negotiated processes sustained by 'multifarious capillaries of associations and action' of texts, materials and bodies (p. 37). Indeed, the nature of what constitutes 'critique' as a philosophical practice is similarly debated in reference to how critical knowledge and the

constitution of the critical 'subject' is shaped by the social, political and historical contexts in which such criticality takes place (Asad et al., 2009). In this, as Butler describes, criticality comprises of 'embodied and affective practices, modes of subjectivity that are bound up with their objects and thus relational' (*ibid*, p.101). Thus what it means to be critical is simultaneously subjective and shaped by context, suggesting a need to avoid simplistic or decontextualised definitions.

Building on this rich body of existing critical thinking scholarship, this paper explores two dominant co-existing definitions of critical thinking that emerged from empirical data collection with a focus on UK undergraduate social science students. This is firstly the idea of critical thinking as an instrumentalised practice akin to a technology for assessment and secondly, the idea of critical thinking as individualised work on the self. This paper discusses how these different definitions circulated and were given value and what forms of knowledge and critical knowers they privileged as a consequence. I theorise this using Barad's (2007) work on the apparatus as a shifting optic that constructs what and who is valued as knowledge/knowers, to ask not so much what critical thinking *is* (and consequently how it can be taught and learnt) but specifically its dominant *state* within higher education, particularly against a backdrop of neoliberalism. I argue that, while multiple meanings of critical thinking co-exist, neoliberalism's values construct particular 'apparatus' (Barad, 2007) that operate to make visible particular enactments of 'critical' knowledge/knowers as 'valuable'. While the focus of this study is on UK higher education, the pervasiveness of neoliberalism as a global phenomenon and policy discourse means that some of the claims may resonate with those working in other geographic and sector contexts.

The neoliberal academy and its discontents

Neoliberalism refers to an economic philosophy premised on the notion that 'human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms' in a socio-economic and political context 'characterised by strong private-property rights, free-markets and free-trade' (Harvey, 2005, p.2). Yet its scope extends beyond the free market economy to policy frameworks, socio-political ideologies and the identity formation of subjects in relation to the state. As a phenomena it is contradictory and multi-faceted, being both a 'political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance' (Larner, 2000, p. 6). Neoliberal polices, ideologies and governmentalities have been intensified as a global political and economic discourse, such that 'it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world' (Harvey, 2005, p.3). This paper does not claim to offer a theorisation of neoliberalism and recognises the need to critically attend to its complexity. Instead, it focuses specifically on how neoliberalism,

as 'common sense', reformulates identities and (re)produces specific forms of subjectivity within educational contexts that are valued/value-less.

Neoliberalism's effects have been seen to cascade through education, most visibly via forms of commodification (Connell, 2013) in terms of governance, pedagogies and social relations. A neoliberal logic (Giroux, 2002) has permeated academy such that:

> Instead of thinking about educating citizens for the value of democracy or civilization or simply being educated people, everyone thinks now of…higher education - as simply an investment in one's own individual future, as a bit of capital that wants to enhance its value, become worth more, and become capable of earning a higher income. (Brown, 2015b, para 9)

Brown testifies to how higher education has become disconnected from a moral or intellectual vision as a public good towards becoming tradable capital of an individualised private investment valued for its future earning capacity. This reflects her theorisation of 'homo economicus' whereby market values and metrics have come to order every sphere of life, including knowledge and the knower. A consequence of this is that neoliberal rationality 'recognizes and interpellates the subject *only* as human capital' (Brown, 2015a, p. 183). Knowledge gets understood as a form of intellectual investment with differential 'value' and the knower is required think about their educational experiences *only* in terms of:

> [h]ow do I take a set of possible experiences or possibilities and use them to enhance my human capital, to enhance its present value and its possible future value? (Brown, 2015b, para 22)

Brown's theorisations reflect other imaginaries of the student as 'narcissist' consumer, driven by a desire for learning gain as a return on investment (Nixon and Hearn, 2018; Williams, 2013). Strikingly, a previous UK Minister for Universities Sam Gyimah called for a 'money supermarket' approach for students choosing a university to compare the value of its educational products, as if shopping for insurance products (Gyimah, 2018).

This takeover of higher education by the logic of the market has important consequences for understanding the purpose, significance and legibility of critical thinking. Historically, higher education was intended to produce more democratic citizens, capable of critically debating and creating solutions to the problems facing society (e.g. Barnett, 1997). However, Davies (2003) argues that the prominence of neoliberal discourses, with their emphasis on individual self-surveillance, management and control, acts to stifle critical debate in the academy. Evans (2004) agrees that higher education has shifted from a world where creativity and criticality were prized, to a world where universities are expected to fulfil the roles of the marketplace and act as training grounds for employment. For example, the closure of the philosophy department of the University of Middlesex and its threatened closure at the University of Hull in the UK attend

to the ways in which 'you cannot easily market deep reflection nor patent its results' (Connell, 2013, p. 109). The dominance of market practices has been theorised as stimulating anti-intellectual and anti-democratic cultures which 'kill' (Evans, 2004) or 'undermine' (Morrall and Goodman, 2012) critical thinking.

A key emergent consequence of neoliberalism's lens of governmentality (Larner, 2000) is a culture of performativity, enacted through educational regulation and performance management of both staff and students, within which what *counts* is only that which can be *counted* (Ball, 2012). Both staff and students are required to habitually shape themselves as productive and valuable (Davies, 2003). In relation to teaching, Burrows (2012) describes how, conscious of the organising values of the commodified academy, academics increasingly focus their pedagogical practice on 'the preferences, tastes and mores of an ever more consumerist audience' (p. 367) resulting in less space for risk, uncertainty and critique. Moreover, Erikson and Erikson (2018) describe how a neoliberal logic formulates itself in everyday teaching and learning vocabulary that can act to narrow possibility of theorising learning otherwise. Reflecting on this, Canaan (2013) notes how the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in the academy has led those committed to critical pedagogies to feel 'depleted, stressed and depressed' (p.44) at the seemingly insurmountable challenges this presents.

Yet neoliberalism does not produce a blanket response and its processes and polices are experienced by educators through creative processes of interpretation and translation (Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2011). For example, Archer (2008) describes how many university faculty are 'inevitable' and also 'conflicted' neo-liberal subjects, who engage in small acts of critique and resistance, but whose academic subjectivities are, nonetheless, dominated by neoliberal, economical practices and vocabularies. Indeed, the production of this paper itself, as a critique of neoliberalism, simultaneously becomes a quantifiable performance of 'good' neoliberal academic selfhood, reifying the critical practices it purports to deconstruct.

For students, their 'performativity' can be conceptualised as the need to continually demonstrate educational engagement in ways that can be counted e.g. via the completion of formal assessments towards the achievement of a degree. Within such a context, student consumers are characterised as enacting critical thinking as a 'surface' pedagogical performance that doubles as an indicator of learning gain. For example, Barad (2012) describes how her students are so well trained in critical thinking that they can 'spit it out with the push of a button' (para 4). Moreover, instrumental discourses of assessment permeate beyond the classroom to the emotional and social worlds of the higher education classroom via practices such as formally assessing critical reflection. Macfarlane (2014) explores how studying in higher education becomes a form of 'soulcraft' in that becoming a successful student requires a continual and

public performance of the most private aspects of learning. Despite this presence of consumerist, individualised and instrumental student subjectivities, the academy is simultaneously and inseparably alive with more recognisably 'deconstructive' criticality. Indeed, the past decade has seen a number of high-profile student activist movements in the UK, most notably in 2010 in response to increased student fees (e.g. White, 2010) in 2012 critiquing the privatisation of university campuses (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2013) and in 2018 in support for striking faculty (NUS, 2018). Moreover, these actions to organise, occupy and disrupt, challenged popular narratives that trivialise or de-legitimatise students' political actions as driven by consumer logics or immature, 'like-button laziness' (Gagnon, 2018, p. 91).

My own institution in 2012 and 2013 saw students occupy buildings in protest at the outsourcing of accommodation, catering and security services to private companies - implying resistance to the conceptualisation of the university as a business, rather than an educational community (Danvers and Gagnon, 2014). While both activism and criticality take multiple forms and the former is not necessarily indicative of the latter, the fact that is specifically directed towards the kinds of knowledge produced within the academy make it difficult to argue for an *absence* of student critical thinking. Indeed, these student activists specifically drew connections between increased academic marketisation and its negative impact on student criticality whereby:

> this new ideation of the university is continually forcing us as students to think of ourselves as selfish consumers, rather than encouraging us to critically engage with the status quo for the benefit of others. (Segalov, 2013, para 9)

Segalov, one of the leaders of the student protest, is concerned that consumer discourses *only* provide terminology to explain critical knowledge in terms of an individual free-agent accumulating education purely for its resale value, obscuring other educational philosophies such as the critical engagement with the status quo to inform debates about collective social justice. The neoliberal academy appears to privilege particular practices, expression and vocabularies of students and their critical thinking but, importantly it does not preclude, as Archer (2008) suggests, moments of resistance. Indeed Rowland (2003) describes how lecturers across three national contexts of Russia, South Africa and Britain characterised their students as being 'apolitical', 'apathetic' and 'consumerist' (p.92). These lecturers felt that students did not share (or verbalise) their values of 'equality' and 'anti-prejudice'. Crucially however, they felt that this was the fault of the institutions' adoption of instrumentalised, marketised pedagogies and practices, rather than because students were *not* critically aware.

While academic analysis of neoliberalism's consequences, particularly in educational research, has been commonly narrated as 'a catch-all for something negative' (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013, p.261), it defies a simple story of its meanings, processes or effects. Indeed, it is a simple

story to reify neoliberalism as an amorphous 'enemy' both to higher education and to critical thinking. Neoliberalism's affects cannot always be neatly teased apart from other behaviours and trends within higher education. For example, Marginson (2011) describes how neoliberalism is one of a number of imaginaries dominating higher education alongside status ranking/competition and communications/collegiality – all of which overlap and produce varying consequences for society, the institution and its members. The 'neoliberal academy' is therefore not monolithic and 'critical' engagements with it are similarly multifaceted and non-deterministic. Neither though, is neoliberalism benign nor absent. Working with this contradiction, I am inspired by Larner's (2000) theorisation of neoliberalism as multi-vocal such that understanding its effects within any particular context requires in-depth research. Neoliberalism represents an important contextualising backdrop to UK higher education which, from the analysis presented below, acts to re(produce) particular 'critical' subjectivities as having more or less value. In particular I explore through my data how critical thinking comes to be framed within a governance and institutional framework which valorises consumerist, individualised and instrumental subjectivity.

Researching Critical Thinking

The data which informs and illustrates this paper consists of a series of qualitative encounters with first-year undergraduates at a UK research-intensive university. These were two cohorts of students – the first from an applied social science discipline (named 'professional') and a second from theoretical social sciences (named 'academic'), with a student population of 45 and 46 students respectively. While these labels are crude, their purpose was to enable an analysis of the different modes of knowledge production of vocational and non-vocational subjects and associated with this, what subject formations they privileged.

Over a period of three months, I engaged in loosely structured observation of these two groups of students in their weekly lectures and seminars for a core compulsory module themed around academic skills development in each course. Guiding themes for the observations included the pedagogical, social, moral and political discourses of critical thinking and how students responded to these ideas amongst their peers. Where appropriate, I took part in classroom activities and discussions as a 'peer' and also took notes in my research diary that took account of what could be seen and heard, reflecting both auditory and visual aspects of classroom interactions. I also payed reflexive attention to moments where my presence appeared to shape these. In practice, what emerged as observation 'data' were the teacher's pedagogic intentions in relation to critical thinking as well as students' reaction and reflection. This included both formal classroom content and informal chats, for example, in the coffee break I regularly shared with the academic lecturer. As these went beyond the original scope of observing students,

anything I included that drew on these more extended observations was negotiated via email or in person before using.

Midway through the observations, I interviewed 15 of these students, selected to span a range of identities, experiences and demographic characteristics (7 from the academic and 8 from the professional cohort). The interviews were semi-structured, with guiding questions around students' initial reflections about university study; their understandings of critical thinking; how they were taught to be critical; what being critical felt like and how it related to their studies, wider lives and future careers. To follow up, towards the end of their first academic year, 4 students (2 from each cohort) took part in a focus group. This involved discussing 4 case study examples of women engaging in public acts of critical thinking. These interview encounters intended to broadly explore students' everyday engagements with, and responses to, practices of critical thinking at university and their reflections on the role of critical thinking in their lives and futures. The data analysis comprised of the generation of themes and a reflexive process of 'writing towards and against' these as researcher while being attentive to what glowed as 'hot spots' in the data (MacLure, 2013, p. 173). My thinking with (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) the data was informed by a range of feminist post-structural (e.g. Ahmed, 2010, Berlant, 2011) and feminist new-materialist scholarship (Barad, 2007, Fenwick and Edwards, 2013). The contribution of these theoretical tools for thinking about critical thinking is explored in depth elsewhere (Danvers, 2015).

The data in this paper is theorised drawing on Barad's notion of the apparatus as an optic on which to shape and construct boundaries around knowledge/the knower. For Barad (2007) apparatus are not simply observing instruments but:

> Boundary-drawing practices, specific material (re)configurings of the world, which comes to matter. (p.140)

This means that how phenomena (or aspects of the social, material and discursive world) come to matter is shaped by the tools or apparatus in which they are viewed or conceptualised. What we see and how we interpret knowledge as always already contextualised knowers, it therefore continually interlinked and co-constituted (Barad, 2010). For example, as a researcher I am entangled in the production of critical thinking and critical thinkers that I re-cite and boundary here. In addition, these apparatus simultaneously reflect and are reflective of conditions of possibility - they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad, 2007). Thus apparatus are gathered and boundaried through routinised practices that construct particular, and often naturalised, viewpoints on which to see (and judge) phenomena. Knowledge is formed through shifting boundary making practices and via specific apparatus or contextualising optics of possibility. Consequently, this paper asks how do particular 'apparatus' or ways of seeing

critical thinking emerge, what forms of knowledge and knowers do they privilege (for example through the academic/professional courses) and what do they produce against the specific and yet altogether contradictory context of neoliberal higher education?

Critical Thinking as Instrumentalised and Individualised

Two dominant definitions of critical thinking emerged from the data. Firstly, critical thinking was understood to be a tangible, academic learning outcome that must be mastered and performed in order to be a successful student. Secondly, critical thinking was characterised as a passport to self-improvement via a form of a psychological 'work out' between knowledge and the knower. I now draw on my data analysis to illustrate both aspects.

Critical Thinking: Mastering, Performing, Succeeding

The notion that critical thinking was a technology to be 'mastered' and 'performed' to achieve 'success' was a dominant discourse in both student cohorts. However, it rubbed up against simultaneous understandings of critical thinking as a form of socio-political activism. This suggests an incompatibility and a hierarchy between different forms of criticality, with one as technological, neoliberal self-interest and the latter as more collective, 'political' and socially productive. Yet while these ideas existed in student understandings and in teaching practices *concurrently,* what is significant is that *only* the former came to 'matter' (Barad, 2007).

My observation note below describes a moment a critical thinking lecture for the professional cohort was interrupted by a student protest on campus:

> *The lecture this week is on critical thinking. I notice an emphasis on critically as a form of introspective work on the self, both to challenge (and overcome?) the inherit bias of our value systems and to develop personal characteristics of openness and flexibility to be able to effectively judge truth claims in professional settings (objectively?). It feels quite psychological. About halfway through the session I hear noises outside - the din of a megaphone and muffled tones of a group chant - but it is hard to work out exactly what is going on. We are in a glass fronted building on the second floor but because the blinds are down I can't see anything. The students start looking outside. I remember that a student protest is happening today in solidarity for academic staff striking tomorrow. The lecturer, Judy, tells the group 'I think it is a student protest' and sounds frustrated, saying loudly 'tell me to shout it you can't hear'. I notice the class start to talk amongst themselves and Judy repeats impatiently 'can you hear me' and carries on reading from the slides. After a few minutes the voices die down and Judy continues.*

The lecturer and students did not verbalise any connection between critical thinking as a form of cerebral mastery over knowledge and knowing described in the lecture, and the lived activism outside. In fact, they materialised themselves to be entirely incompatible.

Indeed, the data points towards a process of boundary making that constructs a gap between these different enactments of critical thinking. Moreover, it also indicates that criticality was not

entirely absent and, as I will describe, is strongly present in the seminar discussion that followed but, as Rowland (2003) suggests, differently configured. To illustrate this further, the lecture described above was cut short by an announcement that changes to central government funding for the course meant that the majority of students would now no longer be eligible for financial assistance. After the lecture ended, there was a considerable buzz in the room, which carried over to the seminar. While the seminar was intended to be about critical writing, students instead talked about the cuts, how frustrated they were and what actions they could take. They connected these cuts to a larger political agenda of austerity and also critiqued the salary level at which the funding would be cut of, expressing that their incomes were still low enough that this would be life-changing. This reflection, beyond the specific consequences for themselves, indicated evidence of students' meta-criticality or making connections between the individual and the socio-political.

The seminar leader Ana, said to the group you will be '*bulldozed over unless you stand up'* and urged students to '*get together, discuss if you want to do something more proactive…we would support you'* (Professional Observation - PO). The students agreed: '*I think we probably should. No one will listen to one person'* (Jennie, PO). Ellie, the student rep agreed to set up a discussion topic on the online forum to start the ball rolling. Ana then asked whether students had heard of the student protests on campus. A few nodded, one responded '*I liked them on Facebook'*. Ana urged the students to read about the protest and get involved. A few students had written it down and, strikingly, this was the only writing that had taken place in the session, demonstrating its symbolic impact. I spoke to Ana after the seminar about how the students' criticality in the seminar was very different to the ideas presented to them in the critical thinking lecture and whether they would reconcile the two together as both being critical thinking. She responded '*maybe it's too soon for them to make that link, or maybe they never will'*.

This data indicates a distinct gap formed *between* these different understandings. Importantly, in relation to the professional course learning outcomes, the protest and the buzz of the seminar discussions were not the kind of criticality that came to 'matter'. Instead, critical thinking was narrowly conceptualised within the lecture as an academic skill and professional competency, demonstrated through specific behaviours associated with university assessment. This meant that the other 'critical' talk was boundaried as a diversion from the intended seminar content about criticality, rather than an enactment of it. This indicates how the process of boundary making around critical practices also produced a differential 'valuing' of different forms and that this was shaped by the dominance of discourses of assessment as a form of 'mastery' over academic and professional knowledge.

In the academic course, the technology of assessment also functioned as a boundary-drawing practice that defined critical thinking in an instrumental way, albeit differently. Here, some direct links were made between more cerebral criticality and critical political activism, suggesting the boundary drawing practices between the two were not *so* distinct in this context. For example, the reasons for the protest on campus that week were explained to students in class and students were informed that they could come along and support it, if they wished. The academic lecturer, Kathryn, emphasised that critical thinking was about political citizenship and for:

> *defending ourselves against the monopolising interests of huge corporations and governments constantly trying to peddle us their view. To be socially responsible we need not just to understand and reproduce but evaluate and challenge.* (Academic Observation - AO)

This rooting of criticality in social justice also reveals the political values that constituted the specific apparatus of what being legitimately 'critical' looked like in the academic discipline and its boundary-drawing practices. Yet students' opportunities to demonstrate their critical thinking in this module were similarly limited to formal and informal assessment e.g. via a critical book review assessment within which critical thinking was judged through the nuances of traditional academic language. The impact of knowledge being constructed around (and thus directed towards) assessment within the wider academy, meant there was little space for anything else.

The force of assessment as a boundary-making practice produced in students an instrumental approach to critical practices, akin to a technologised 'spell check' before submitting. In the focus group, Bronwyn, a professional student, reflects about the role of critical thinking in her first-year studies saying:

> *We're being forced to think so much deeper. You know, you have to in order to fulfil the words and the learning outcomes.*

Similarly in an interview with Tobias, an academic student, he talks about why he thinks critical thinking is important:

> *I think we have to critically analyse things to progress. If you don't then maybe you might not get above a certain mark or a certain grade.*

For both Bronwyn and Tobias, critical thinking was strongly aligned with successful assessment performances. Consequently to maximise your intellectual investment, it seems logical to appropriate behaviours that lead to positive results, which themselves can be considered particular forms of 'mattering' that are privileged by these academic boundary-drawing practices. While student conscientiousness in relation to assessment is not 'neoliberal' in itself, as a consequence of the instrumental grammar surrounding criticality, students often described

their critical thinking in highly technologised ways. For example, in the academic seminar I spoke to a student about how her essay was going and she said '*it's almost done, I just need to put the critical 'bit' in* (Becky, AO).

On the other hand, and once again symptomatic of the contradictions of learning within the neoliberal academy, Becky, Bronwyn and Tobias simultaneously reflected on the ways in which they may think criticality and act upon it in their wider lives – from influencing the ways they watch TV (Becky) to a depth of engagement with academic and professional knowledge:

> *I was thinking of using it really specifically in my work and in looking at articles and stuff but... Now I think it is going to help in just life generally.* (Tobias, Focus Group)

> *As much as maybe more surface thinking, not going deeper, might seem nice and simple...if we approach that surface thinking [in our professional practice]...then we are going to be missing a lot of things we need to deal with...* (Bronwyn, Focus Group)

Yet while students can and did work within multiple definitions, the significance is that certain discourses were given more symbolic credence within higher education classrooms than others. Indeed, the strong boundary drawn around critical thinking as a technology of assessment to be 'added' or 'done to' relates to the dominance of discourses of education's measurable value that circulated in the classroom. While the notion of 'value' is not new to higher education because, for example, pedagogic relationships traditionally requires one giving approval or 'value' to another's work along a set of criteria – a narrowing occurs where critical thinking *only* becomes something to get 'right' within a practice of set boundaries, rather than a practice of questioning and pushing boundaries.

Overall, the data suggest a privileging of critical thinking as an instrumentalised, pedagogical performance indicator of learning gain. Critical thinking becomes a technology to be 'done to' knowledge, signifying, as Brown (2015a) suggests, the powerful presence of homo-economicus within higher education's critical knowledge practices. Using Barad's (2007) work on the apparatus, this data indicates that what it meant to do critical thinking and how this might be legitimated within and through higher education institutions was deeply contextual and strongly shaped by factors including disciplinary values, faculty and students' identities and experiences (explored in detail in Danvers, 2018) and dominant knowledge practices around learning and assessment. These practices intra-acted to produce particular apparatus or ways of seeing critical thinking and, while multiple and often contradictory forms of criticality existed within the multi-vocality of neoliberalism (Larner, 2000), what came to matter was a technologised understanding of critical thinking as a tool for assessment success. This appeared both to narrow the purpose and direction of critical thinking towards an instrumentalised, pedagogical performance indicator, as well as deepen the gap between this and ways of doing otherwise.

Critical Thinking: A Passport To Self-Improvement?

A second dominant understanding of critical thinking that revealed itself in the data was via the apparatus of individualised work on the self in which critical thinking and critical reflection became inseparable. Here, boundary making practices were inward rather than outwardly focused and drew on specific enactments of self-surveillance (Davies, 2003) self-investment (Brown, 2015a) and soulcraft (Macfarlane, 2012) characterised as key to neoliberal student selfhood. In such a context, critical thinking potentially becomes domesticated into an individualised and psychologised passport to self-improvement. This became aligned, on occasion, as systematic evidence of doing 'good' thinking, whereby a commitment to critical self-improvement is an unproblematised and inherent part of the good life (Berlant, 2011).

Critical thinking was positioned by students as process of internal boundary making between different forms of knowledge and knowing, enacted through reflection. For example, many of the professional students in particular, allied themselves with a view of critical thinking as a process of deep consideration of who they are and their place in the world. This then gets tied up with notions of self-improvement as Teresa and Emma, both professional students, discuss in our interviews:

> *I think my perception of critical thinking is that you can use it quite personally. You can use it to your advantage if you like look at a situation where you've acted in you can then think 'oh I did that well or I didn't' and you can work on it…critical thinking it can be really good for improving yourself.* (Emma)

> *It gives you the opportunity to think and reflect on your experiences and your ideas … and how your thinking can change…when you go into work, again you won't stop doing critical thinking. Because I think it helps you develop as a person I guess… And it also gives you the opportunity to open your mind and think about what you are doing…I feel it's a really good process because it helps me, I dunno, realise who I am, like, my identity.* (Teresa)

Emma positions critical reflection as a way to build on previous experiences to progress and develop in relation to her personal and professional identity. Similarly, Teresa narrates how critical thinking helps her think about who she is and how she can continually better herself. Such perspectives mirror the kinds of things the professional faculty said about how critical thinking:

> *can improve you as a person; enable you to be clearer about what you are doing and how you fit within the wider idea of things.* (Judy, PO)

Critical thinking and reflection in these accounts above become inseparable forces of self-betterment. Consequently, students are encouraged from the first lecture onwards to keep a reflective diary, sections of which will be submitted for assessment. This pedagogic technique

dominated the professional course, however the use of reflection is also drawn upon in the academic classroom as a way to process learning and thinking.

Despite this common sense notion that critical reflection for self-improvement is a 'good thing', such emotion work is not unproblematic. For example, students revealed anxieties about exactly what emotion work is required:

> *In my reflective journal, some days I feel like Bridget Jones. I mean, how far do I go? Who cares? Should I just be constantly reflecting on the relevance it has to academic work?* (Ellie, PO).

Being reflective involves crafting a vision of who you are and how you publically speak about yourself, which draws on cultural references to diary-keeping, affective investments of self-revelation and being aware of the 'rules of the game' for the assessment of your emotional performance. As Macfarlane (2014) argues, higher education classrooms require a specific demonstration of emotion and critical reflection that is embodied and contextually specific and, crucially, rarely problematised. For example, it is not a simple case of digging in to our private selves and laying out our critical reflection on the page or in the classroom discussion but involves more complex and contextual pedagogic intra-actions (Barad, 2007).

Furthermore, psychologising critical thinking in this way has the potential to make it internalised and self-referential. For example, practices of critical thinking for self-improvement draw on the cultural dominance of the positive thinking society and its focus on individual betterment through developing characteristics such as optimism, will or motivation (Ehrenreich, 2010). This tendency links to debates about the role of positive psychology and the happiness 'industry' which gives cultural importance to self-improvement through 'thinking it out'. Indeed, this focus on individualising and psychologising critical reflection, as opposed to thinking critically about broader structural forces such as inequality of opportunity, is particularly symptomatic of neoliberal conceptions of individual subjectivity and responsibility, as theorised by Brown (2015a).

However, while all the teaching staff raised the difficulties with trying to understand personal and professional identities through critical reflection – this did not make the practice *optional*. Instead, performing critical reflection becomes a key part of performing successful student identity. Indeed, to not engage, as Jo states, is to risk being '*a dangerous practitioner'* (PO*)*. This, along with Emma and Teresa's quote, cements the strong link between doing such emotion work (and investing in it as a good practice) and linear trajectories towards becoming 'better' students and professionals. Yet the circulation of such disciplinary emotional practices as unproblematic can obscure the way such practices reproduce normative values. For example,

it requires adopting a specific emotional vocabulary of student-hood, which Macfarlane (2014) argues:

> demands an oral and textual enactment of the private and the personal, domesticating, rather than empowering students as free and independent thinkers. (p.10)

The internalised direction of this boundary-making draws on broader neoliberal notions of individualised performativity. For example, the need to continually develop and demonstrate the 'brand called you' dominates continual professional development in most people-centred professional disciplines such as in Education and Healthcare (e.g. National Union of Teachers, 2016, British Association of Social Workers, 2016). Davies (2003) is critical of the way that this creates the 'continually-changing individual' (p.93) whose self-surveillance through a 'multiplied gaze' (p.92) turns direction away from critique of the broader system of neoliberal governance. This is exemplified in the way Ana connects criticality to self-protection, as well as self-improvement in saying:

> *The workplace we are preparing you for is dire…you need to know how to challenge that appropriately…reflection can help you learn what works for you and why…and look after yourself.* (PO)

Here, emotion work is given a huge amount of significance for personal and professional survival. While Ana is conscious of preparing students realistically for the world of work, it does direct their critical attentions towards *reflection* rather than *resistance*. This was particularly problematic in relation to the futures of the students entering a profession with a high staff turnover due to increased workloads, funding cuts and intense media scrutiny.

Echoes of neoliberalism's demands for performative self-regulation and self-governmentality, as theorised by Macfarlane (2014) and Davies (2003) appear within this data. Refracting this through Barad (2007), this created a dominance and necessity to perform criticality as an internal, as well as external practice of boundary making, as if a passport for self-improvement. This can be theorised as creating specific rationalities for doing/performing critical thinking as individualised emotion work. Again, these dominant apparatus become routinised and naturalised as the way critical thinking gets done, excluding alternative understandings and practices. This includes space for looking outwards, toward critical (and collective) social change – potentially domesticating criticality's transformative power.

Critical thinking and the optics of possibility within neoliberal higher education

The neoliberal academy produces and privileges particular ways of seeing critical knowledge and the knower that are reflective of, and re-produce, its dominant economic rationalities. While multiple formations of critical thinking rub up against each other within this complex and contradictory space, instrumentalised and individualised practices dominate and are given value.

Using Barad's (2007) concept of the 'apparatus', these dominant narratives of critical thinking and the critical thinker produce optics of possibility – they construct boundaries over what forms of critical knowledge and critical knowers can be made visible and valued. These then get boundaried and reproduced such that *these* ways of seeing become naturalised as *the* common sense way of seeing, with particular consequences for alternative imaginaries.

Where critical thinking was narrowly positioned as an instrumentalised pedagogic performance indicator this acts to domesticate and obfuscate critical thinking's potential radical transformative power by instead seeing it as something to get 'right' within a practice of impermeable boundaries, rather than a practice of questioning or re-writing boundaries. In addition, where critical thinking has become relatedly internalised as psychological work on the self, this acts to turn the focus inwards towards continual self-surveillance characteristic of the neoliberal 'performative' self. Arguably, a politics of individualised *reflection* over collective *resistance* acts to close down criticality's potential for action, particularly on behalf of others – concerns that Brown (2015a) and others feel *should* dominate the educational philosophies of public higher education institutions. While these apparatus produced different engagements with critical thinking, they both strongly reflected the organising tenets of neoliberalism as self-commodification.

The purpose of this paper is not to suggest a hierarchy between different forms of critical thinking or suggest that these instrumental and individualised understandings were universally bad news. Instead, it sought to explore how these understandings, closely connected to neoliberal economic rationalities and its concurrent valuing of 'self-making' subjects, become *the* way of seeing and consequently draws attention away from alternatives. The conceptual limits of neoliberalism as a framing for higher education's value and values are neatly summarised by Hey and Morley (2011) who argue:

> Our students and their studying, our lives and their lives, are entwined in deep commitments that cannot be captured by thin notions of the 'economical man' which seem to haunt the imaginary of the policy mandarins. It is not that students, or indeed ourselves, would wish away 'employability', nor that we lack 'aspirations' or are unconcerned about 'excellence', but the… desires and pleasures of the work we all do… [have] a different order of importance. (pp. 170-171)

The use of neoliberal, economic vocabulary for understanding higher education's value and values concurrently provides a limited grammar for understanding the embodied, contextual and contingent nature of critical thinking. It creates a narrowing of *what* and *who c*an be viewed as critical.

Yet, this paper simultaneously exemplified other examples of criticality - such as students engaging in and responding to socio-political protest, thinking critically about building

arguments in their assessments and meta-reflecting on their lives and futures. I also described how the two modules fostered criticality as a central part of their pedagogies and noted how other, counter-hegemonic, discourses circulated too. Indeed, as Brown (2015b) describes, there are other rationalities and discourses rubbing up against neoliberalism, particularly from students disillusioned with their identities as *only* human capital. Moreover, in writing this I am painfully aware that, despite my own theoretical commitment to re-thinking criticality, I equally cite instrumental narratives, as well as more 'rebellious' ones in my own classroom. We are likely all, as Archer (2008) suggests, conflicted and inevitable neoliberal subjects. Bozalek *et al.*'s (2014) notion of 'critical hope' is a particularly helpful response to negotiating the conflicts of those who wish to re-think practices of doing and being critical against the constrictions of neoliberalism. Here, hope is evoked as a way to continue to imagine new possibilities whilst at the same time continually problematising what can be hoped for and how it can be made possible. Thus, despite critical thinking being predominantly understood in instrument and individualised ways, glimmers of resistance emerge in this data via alternative enactments of criticality from both students and faculty. Potentially, neoliberalism's multi-vocality (Larner, 2000) is both its failing and its saviour.

Turning towards the pedagogic consequences for students and academics committed to forms of criticality that are resistant to the dominant, economic optics of possibility, how could we do otherwise? Crucially what this paper recognises is that the context in which criticality takes place matters a great deal. Returning to a Baradian analysis, how critical thinking becomes gathered and boundaried through practices is reflected in the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering: 'they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (Barad, 2007, p.148). In everyday language, this suggests that what it means to be a critical thinker is not straightforward or transparent but instead reflects specific way(s) of seeing, and defining the boundaries of, critical thinking. Such a claim means that enacting critical thinking in ways that retain possibilities of transgression/resignification and that go beyond an instrumentalised technology should therefore be understood as less of an exercise in students meeting critical learning objectives and more about interrogating the social-material-discursive conditions of possibly for *becoming* critical beings. Therefore if becoming a critical thinker is a contextual and embodied process it consequently requires pedagogical initiatives that make space to interrogate the boundaries and exclusions this produces. Firstly, this could be through questioning the historical processes shaping the legitimatisation of critical voices in specific (privileged) bodies/ through recognising that criticality is a deeply collective process, separate from the notion of a single 'knower' and produced in and through pedagogical contexts. Secondly, this involves undoing the notion that academic critical thinking is a decontextualised and straightforward process, rather than a deeply affective and situated one. Fundamentally, this

involves asking not 'how can I or my students be more critical' but together interrogating 'what are the conditions of possibility for becoming successful critical beings in this module, course or institution?' It's an (albeit imperfect) start.

Funders

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