

**“Why is it so” or indeed “Why isn’t it so”?: Critical spirit, a partner in Queensland  
TAFE teachers’ lifelong learning**

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## **“Why is it so” or indeed “Why isn’t it so”?: Critical spirit, a partner in Queensland TAFE teachers’ lifelong learning**

### **ABSTRACT**

Critical spirit is perceived as a disposition, a tendency or an attitude that collaborates with critical thinking to prompt the asking of the question “why?” within vocational education and training environments. The paper explores the convergence of TAFE teachers’ critical spirit, their work and the concept of lifelong learning.

### **INTRODUCTION**

From 1909 to 1987 Julius Sumner Miller was a lifelong learner. Noted for his eccentric presentation of science on Australian television in the 1960s and 1970s, Sumner Miller continued to ask the question “why?” In doing so, he sought to prompt his viewers to seek reasoned knowledge. It seems fair to suggest that the essence of his questioning was to prompt his viewers to think critically. However, critical thinking, a much debated form of cognition (Paul 1992), is not the central topic of this paper. Critical thinking is referred to, but only to serve as a platform to examine the nuances of critical spirit.

In this paper critical spirit is perceived as a disposition, a tendency or an attitude that collaborates with critical thinking in order to prompt, as Sumner Miller did, the asking of the question “why?” The significance of the paper lies in how it conceptualises the encapsulation of critical spirit within educational environments, and how this encapsulation contributes to an individual’s schema of lifelong learning.

Analysis of this encapsulation of critical spirit is grounded in the discourses surrounding teachers within a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) context in Queensland. The idea of TAFE teachers with critical spirit is considered as those willing to ask the question “why?” They are regarded as demonstrating qualities that are divergent with intellectually compliance and passivity (Oxman-Michelli, 1992). This disposition, and how the TAFE environment affects it, will be explored by examining the role of the TAFE environment in nurturing the elements of critical spirit, and by association critical thinking, and how this affects and enacts the TAFE teacher’s incentive for lifelong learning. By highlighting the manner of the partnership between TAFE and its teachers, it will be argued that the essence of that partnership may be a prohibitive factor in supporting critical spirit, and by association lifelong learning, amongst TAFE teachers in Queensland.

The term “critical spirit” is located within the critical thinking literature. It is referred to as those intrinsic dispositions that motivate people to think, and in particular to think critically (Siegel, 1988). Oxman-Michelli (1992) has articulated what she believes are the important elements of critical spirit: independence of mind, open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, intellectual responsibility and respect for others. Paul (1992) has a similar perception and describes this as rational passion. Rational passion is described as that which marshals one’s energy towards seeking clarity, accuracy and fair-mindedness, “a fervour for getting to the bottom of things...” (p. 282). People with critical spirit could be considered to be people who are more than likely to put energies into critical thinking, and the skill of critical thinking is best facilitated in an environment where critical spirit is fostered (Oxman-Michelli, 1992). This is an environment where compliance and passivity are of less value than curiosity, reciprocity and proactivity. It is this internal disposition, particularly that of TAFE teachers

and their teaching environments, TAFE institutes in Queensland Australia, that is the primary focus of this paper.

This paper's intention is to explore the convergence of TAFE teachers' critical spirit, their work and the concept of lifelong learning. Once the nuances and manifestation of critical spirit have been explored in relation to TAFE teachers, this paper turns its attention to the messy world of their work. It looks to the literature in which TAFE teachers describe their world of work and offers comment on the effects of that world on them and their professionalism. As a concluding position, the concept of lifelong learning is explored in relation to how this fits with TAFE teachers' schema of work.

## **TO CRITICAL SPIRIT VIA CRITICAL THINKING**

Simply, critical spirit relates to the internal disposition of one who thinks critically. The discussion of critical thinking to which we now turn, signposts for readers where critical spirit is situated. The irony is that readers may find that their understanding of critical thinking is still slightly out of focus. This is because there appears no definitive definition of critical thinking.

The debate as to what is and what constitutes critical thinking waxes and wains. Generally it is seen as dealing with problems through careful thinking. Positions such as McPeck (1981), Ennis (1987) and Paul (1992), who occupy different spaces on the critical thinking continuum, have been chosen as examples of the many views on critical thinking. Given the scope of this paper and its limitations regarding length, only the salient points of the authors' perspectives are explored.

McPeck (1981) carefully avoids a definition of critical thinking, citing its elusiveness as the reason. Suggesting that "the concept is overworked and under analysed" (p. 2), McPeck makes the plea that hopefully it is to "think **more** about something specific" (emphasis in original). The specific is emphasised, in that critical thinking is present in relation to some activity or subject that gives rise to being thought about in critical ways only. What critical thinking involves is "a certain scepticism or suspension of assent, towards a given statement, established norm or mode of doing things" (p. 6). McPeck sees critical thinking's scepticism as different from thinking in a contrary manner by suggesting that the scepticism is both judicious and reflective, in the sense that one demonstrates a level of deliberation that is capable of offering an alternative perspective. McPeck states that it is "...the disposition and skill to do X in such a way that E (the available evidence from a field) is suspended (or temporarily rejected) as sufficient to establish the truth or viability of P (some proposition) or action within X" (p. 13).

Emphasised in McPeck's (1981) rendition of critical thinking is its application to the particular. In discussing the application of logic, McPeck argues that we need specialised knowledge of the field in question before we can appropriately apply logic successfully. He cites Toulmin (1958; cited in McPeck, 1981, p. 33) in his assertion that there are as many logics as there are distinguishable fields: "Therefore for the purposes of critical thinking we should consider each field of inquiry to have its own peculiar epistemology...[which suggests that there is]...no clear single or monolithic route to effective critical thinking for all" (pp. 33-34). Robert Ennis's (1987) view of critical thinking does not directly connect with specialised knowledge and it does offer a prescription of dispositions, skills and abilities; it is to his definition that we now turn.

From Ennis's (1987) perspective of critical thinking as both practical and reflective comes his working definition: "Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 10). Ennis believes that critical thinking is not necessarily embedded in subject matter areas, and that its teaching can be separated from content by emphasising its thinking component. In his taxonomy of critical thinking dispositions and abilities, Ennis showcases what he believes are the significant features of critical thinking. For example:

- dispositions such as seeking reasons, being open-minded, and using one's critical thinking abilities, and
- abilities such as formulating questions, analysing arguments, inference and deduction.

His belief is that his taxonomy "forms the basis for a thinking-across-the-curriculum-program..." (Ennis, 1987, p. 25), as well as for a stand-alone critical thinking course.

Richard Paul (1992) offers contributions from the area of philosophy. He reminds us "that critical thinking is a process of thinking to a standard" (Huitt, 1998 p. 1). Paul's definition is three tiered:

Critical thinking: 1) Disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thinking. 2) Thinking that displays mastery of intellectual skills and abilities. 3) The art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, or more defensible. (p. 643)

What is evident in this definition is its attention to domains, skills and abilities. These elements of the definition align well with McPeck (1981) and Ennis (1987). The meta perspective of thinking about thinking for greater quality is distinctive in that it takes reflection to greater depths.

Paul (1992) believes that the types of problems to which critical thinking apply are those with "conceptual messiness" (p. 269). These are problems that cannot be solved or settled within one frame of reference. These problems have links with our values. They are "multilogical... more than one incompatible logic can be advanced for their settlement" (Paul, 1992, p.269). The art of critical thinking from the 'thinking about thinking' perspective encourages individuals to move outside their own frame of reference. Paul puts forward the position that we automatically identify and align ourselves with our own beliefs and experiences, so much so that any questioning by others to the contrary is viewed as a personal attack. Paul sees this as a default mode of thinking which is spontaneous, egocentric and prone to irrational beliefs. Critical thinking, in what Paul calls the strong sense, enables individuals to "...explicate, understand and critique their own deepest prejudices, biases and misconceptions...to discover and contest their own egocentric and sociocentric tendencies" (p. 280). Critical thinking is both dialogical and dialectic thinking (pp. 644–645) in which the individual embarks upon seeking understanding through dialogue encompassing different frames of reference and the comparison of these different frames in fair-minded critique.

The above discussion involves two main elements of critical thinking: the application of critical thinking and associated skills, and the willingness to apply critical thinking. It is to the latter of these that is of importance to this paper, as willingness, or propensity to aligns with dispositions, and it is the disposition of critical spirit that is the central concept being explored.

McPeck (1981) and Ennis (1987) identify the willingness to apply critical thinking as a collection of dispositions which Paul (1992) calls "rational passion... a passionate drive for clarity, accuracy, and fair-mindedness, a fervour for getting to the bottom of things...an

intense aversion to contradiction, [and] sloppy thinking...".(p. 282). Oxman-Michelli (1992) expands this idea of dispositions within critical thinking as critical spirit.

Attitudes, tendencies and propensity align with this idea of spirit. It is not abilities or skills that are the focus, but rather the personal traits or character which motivate the person to avoid "...thoughtless intellectual compliance and passivity" (Oxman-Michelli, 1992, p. 1).

Oxman-Michelli (1992) draws her concept of critical spirit from several sources, for example, Dewey (1933), Paul, (1992) and Siegel, (1988) and identifies five major elements:

Independence of mind,...sense of intellectual autonomy, self understanding...courage;

Open-mindedness,...sense of alert curiosity, attentiveness...willingness to suspend judgment;

Wholeheartedness,...enthusiasm and perseverance in pursuit of an intellectual goal;

Intellectual responsibility, sense of objectivity, integrity...commitment to the process and consequences of reason, [and]

Respect for others, ...empathy, readiness to listen..., (Oxman-Michelli, 1992, p. 5)

## **CRITICAL SPIRIT AND THE TAFE TEACHER**

The introduction of this paper suggested that teachers with critical spirit were willing to ask 'why' questions surrounding their work. This implies that TAFE teachers apply critical thinking and therefore are possibly replete with the disposition of critical spirit. An exploration of TAFE teacher competencies will help to explore this position. The premise behind this exploration is that if competencies can be identified which require the application of critical thinking, than critical spirit is theoretically manifest. One may have the ability to critically think, but one also needs the disposition to apply critical thinking (Oxman-Michelli, 1992).

Chappell and Melville (1995) undertook to provide a professional competence description for teachers in TAFE New South Wales. Applying a multi-method research approach, they sought contributions from over 2300 TAFE teachers. The report that resulted divided teacher practice into three professional domains; Adult Teaching and Learning; Organisational Development and Professional Practice. Under these domains competencies by way of actions, examples and performance guides were listed. The competency of Professional Practice aligns neatly with critical thinking; for example:

Undertakes a critical and developmental examination of pedagogical, practical and contextual knowledge in vocational education and training and contributes to the professional standing of teachers...

[including some identified actions such as,]

Continually reflects on and adjusts personal teaching and learning practices...

Investigates novel problems of practice and uses available resources to address problem... [and]

Contributes to the development of educational theories and practices in VET.

(Chappell & Melville, 1995, pp. 42-43)

The competency of Organisational Development, articulated as "Uses knowledge of organisational policies and initiatives to support and develop effective responses to organisational, industry, community and learners' needs" (p. 45), indicates that it is probable that critical thinking is applied across the above mentioned domains.

Although there is no empirical evidence provided by Chappell and Melville (1995), the above indicates that there is little reason to believe that TAFE teachers cannot critically think, and

that therefore is it probable that they do hold degrees of critical spirit. But what is the degree of their explicit manifestation of critical spirit in relation to the environment in which they work? The significance of the answer lies firstly in what Barnett calls the “Critical Being” (Barnett, 1997, p 61). In expanding the concept of critical thinking beyond the notion of reasoned knowledge to include the self and the world, Barnett highlights the need for individuals to be emancipated from their taken-for-granted worlds through critical thought that encapsulates the above concept of critical spirit. In this case it could be argued that the TAFE teacher would benefit both professionally and personally from applying criticality to their environment. Secondly, is the benefit that could result from the TAFE environment providing opportunities and space for the manifestation of critical spirit. In the proceeding discussion evidence of uncertainty and constant change is provided. In order to cope with this, responding with criticality, as the commercial world is endeavouring to do (Adamson, 2005; Hart, 2005) would be an appropriate response.

## **THE MILIEU**

The environment in which TAFE teachers work is the environment of new vocationalism (Grubb, 1996) or what is more commonly known in Australia as the national training reform (Kronemann, 2001). There is little doubt about the effect that new vocationalism has had on the changing nature of TAFE teachers’ work and identity (Chappell, 1998, 1999). The linking of Australia’s economic performance to the skill level of its workforce is a common discourse (Kempner, 2005). This discourse embraces new vocationalism’s bed partner, economic rationalism. The focus on market type business practices, quality assurance, efficiency, accountability and competition has been tattooed onto the psyche of the VET sector. The inculcation of this discourse into TAFE institutes has produced its fair share of noise, some of which is highlighted below.

Kronemann (2001), who reported on nation wide survey of TAFE teachers, cited “funding cuts and constant restructuring as two of the changes that have had the most impact on their workload... [and that] these changes have had a significant negative impact on how they see their work and their professional interactions...” (p. 1). The majority (68%) of responses indicated that these changes had eroded “their ability to maintain professional standards/provide quality education” (p. 5).

Jones (1999), identified trouble with Training Packages (national, industry recognised competency-based training [CBT] curriculum). It is these that TAFE teachers have to unpack, interpret and make assessment judgments about designing their day-to-day delivery of courses. Jones believes that these judgments are influenced by TAFE teacher’s professional and social contexts and that Training Packages do not take into account this complex, rich environment. Indeed, Jones (1999) emphasises the prescriptive nature of Training Packages using a CBT model as contributing to a perceived loss of autonomy by TAFE teachers over their work. In a recent review of Training Packages it was highlighted that “good teachers will continue to develop their own teaching resources” (Schofield & McDonald, 2004, p. 30). This implies some teacher control, however, the report continues with a call for more “support” (p. 30) for training package implementation and warns of possible deficits within organisational contexts necessary for their implementation.

Firestone and Pennell (1993) make the connection between teacher autonomy and teacher commitment and argue that “systematized forms of instruction and evaluation [such as CBT] ‘deskill’ their [teachers’] work” (p. 495), and are therefore counter productive to intrinsic motivation. They further suggest that these and similar forms of organisational practices, such as those that reduce teacher opportunities for collaboration, decision-making and access

to institutional resources, are the conditions of teachers' work that affect the degree and quality of their work and commitment.

Discussion on teacher burnout is also relevant to those conditions. Brewer and McMahan (2003) collected data from 133 industrial and technical educators listed in the national directory of industrial teacher educators in the United States. The authors found that the highest degree of job related stress in industrial and technical teacher educators came from their perceptions of a lack of organisational support. As high degrees of chronic stress results in burnout (Blackburn & Bently, 1993), teachers in the technical and industrial areas may well be experiencing low commitment. Teachers who are anxious and exhausted are "less likely to challenge authority when faced with rules that keep them from teaching in ways that they define effective" (Firestone & Pennell, 1993 p. 512).

Critical spirit in this world of new vocationalism appears to be under threat. This is ironic, given that there is pressure on educators to be party to the production of students and graduates who think critically (Barnett, 1997). What is argued here is that, in order to engender criticality, educators require the disposition that critical spirit articulates, and the discourse of new vocationalism and the resulting environment of VET and TAFE institutes are not helpful to its manifestation.

The preceding discussion shows that TAFE teachers are now feeling under pressure as TAFE institutes move to shape, reshape and restructure under new vocationalism. Discussion now turns to the convergence of the TAFE environment, critical spirit and TAFE teacher's lifelong learning.

## **TAFE TEACHERS, THEIR WORK AND LIFELONG LEARNING**

The primary premise that underlies lifelong learning is that learners will have implicit motivation to learn throughout their life. Day (1999) argues that teachers need to encourage the development of this disposition within students and that, in order to do this, they too need to be lifelong learners themselves. Chappell and Melville's (1995) report on TAFE teacher competencies would conclude that TAFE teachers do enact lifelong learning competencies. The challenge appears to lie in maintaining the energy and drive to remain lifelong learners. The authors discussed below suggest that new vocationalism and cost are thwarting agents acting against that energy and drive.

Gouthro (2002) emphasises that a market place driven educational agenda has narrowed the concept of lifelong learning to the point that its focus is on 'skilling up'. This is in order to become more competitive within labour markets. It has produced the concept of the educational consumer. Gouthro argues that this is "Lifelong learning that is defined by the profit oriented goals of industry, corporations, governments and policy makers..." (p. 336) as opposed to "Education that focuses on the broader goals of democratic citizenship..." (p. 334). What is interesting in the argument, and pertinent to this paper, is her position that this concept of lifelong learning does not foster critical thinking skills despite employer calls to have "employees [with] critical thinking skills" (p. 335). Gouthro states "...in vocational and professional training programmes students are usually not encouraged to develop the capacity to be truly critical" (p. 335)

Schwartz (2005) asks the question "Is lifelong learning worth the effort?" (p. 1) and concludes that from a dollar value position in Australia, the picture is bleak. A loss of return is indicated for both men and women, aged 40, taking time off work to return to post-compulsory full-time study. He also asserts that in Australia there is a smaller premium paid

for further study. Any increases obtained through promotion are offset by taxes and lost benefits. Social return, calculated as the number of tax inputs a person makes to the government because of earning higher wages as a result of study, also comes out in the red. "Part time study is only marginally rewarding" (Schwartz, 2005, p. 3). From a critical thinking and economic perspective, the climate appears somewhat cloudy for TAFE teachers wanting to continue their lifelong learning.

The above suggests that if the TAFE teacher is to embrace lifelong learning he/she should have the opportunity and capacity to exercise criticality both within the organisational context and in shaping the curriculum to develop criticality within students. Situated engagements that welcome embrace and foster critical spirit could be said to provide these teachers with the energy and drive to continue lifelong learning.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of critical thinking skills for teachers is almost a given (Hager & Kaye, 1990). Whether TAFE teachers choose to apply critical thinking to elements of their work could be said to relate to the degree of critical spirit that manifests implicitly through their personal schema of themselves as professionals, and their responses to their work environment. It would also be fair to suggest that those with critical spirit are lifelong learners, as critical spirit is a lifelong disposition which prompts a person to seek answers to questions, particularly the question 'why'. The TAFE teacher's critical spirit and lifelong learning appear linked and affected by the environment in which these dispositions are played out. From the lifelong learning perspective, it appears that the prescriptive nature of VET curriculum does little to develop criticality and that in fact TAFE teachers are being encouraged to leave their criticality behind as they bend to the urges of new vocationalism. TAFE, in its striving to become more business and profit focused (Chappell, 1999), might do well to explore the value of critical spirit and the incentives to its manifestation.

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