Developing critical thinking in EAP programmes

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary

- Critical thinking is a key element of academic study and for this reason needs to be included as a part of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curricula.

- The education literature provides a variety of definitions and understandings of critical thinking. This variety poses challenges for EAP practitioners about how critical thinking is best integrated into programmes. Among these, a useful working definition is critical thinking as the ability to analyse, synthesise, interpret and evaluate ideas, information, situations and texts.

- A key to understanding this variety is to recognise that there are in fact many different entities that we can be critical about, whether these are ideas, information, situations, texts. These different 'objects of evaluation' imply different criteria used to judge such entities, as well as different academic and research practices used to arrive at such judgments.

A key to understanding this variety is to recognise that there are in fact many different entities that we can be critical about, whether these are ideas, information, situations, texts.

- In practice, this variety suggests the need for a 'situated' approach to the teaching of critical thinking, built around the different tasks and genres that students need to learn e.g. essays, critical reviews etc.

- The literature posits a strong connection between critical thinking and having content knowledge in the area under consideration. This suggests the importance of making reading central to the EAP curriculum, including having students develop a critical and discerning approach to the use of digital-based resources.

- The literature is increasingly equivocal about how much international students' educational backgrounds have a bearing on their ability to be critical. A key challenge for students, however, is learning to be critical in a second language. Any EAP programme needs to ensure that students develop the skills to make sense of what they need to judge, and then to be able to clearly and assuredly express these judgments.

Introduction: the importance of critical thinking

There is no doubting the importance of critical thinking in higher education. The idea runs as a major current through most discussions about what study at university fundamentally entails. Such ideas are ancient ones. Socrates, arguably one of history's first dedicated teachers of critical thinking, insisted to his students that 'the unexamined life is one not worth living'. In the educational foundations of the modern university, the idea was also central. Cardinal John Newman in his famous tract *The Idea of a University* (2018 edition) declared that the purpose of 'intellectual training', as he termed it, is never the mere acquisition of knowledge, but always 'the exercise of thought and reason upon [it]'.

Nowadays, the critical thinking idea is ubiquitous in university discourses. The term (or variants of it) is present in many of the academic tasks set for students (e.g. *Critically evaluate X*); or in the assessment criteria designed to guide them in their approach to their studies (e.g. *The work demonstrates – or does not demonstrate – a suitably critical approach to the subject matter*). More broadly, it features in the types of graduate attributes and skills that institutions insist will be developed by their students over the course of a degree. In recent times, the term has also begun to appear frequently on the lists of qualities wanted by employers in graduate recruitment processes – though, as has been pointed out, what it is that organisations exactly want their employees to be critical about is not always clear (Korn 2014).

Nowadays, the critical thinking idea is ubiquitous in university discourses.

The significant place that critical thinking has in university study has meant that the idea has come to have a major influence on the teaching of EAP. Dwight Atkinson (1990s) in a groundbreaking article published in the 1990s, 'A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL', noted that the concept, previously confined to L1 education contexts, had begun to take a serious root within 'the realm of TESOL'. Some 20 years later, critical thinking is viewed as an essential component of any EAP programme (Dooey, 2010).

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This white paper explores a range of issues related to this aspect EAP teaching. Foremost among these is the question of definitions of critical thinking and the different pedagogical approaches that these entail. As will be seen, there is a good deal of debate and disputation in the literature around these issues. In considering these, the aim is to demonstrate how, as practitioners, we can navigate a way through this diversity of views. Elsewhere in the paper, critical thinking is considered in relation to a range of related areas: genre, knowledge and culture. Significantly, Dwight Atkinson, in his article, exhorts practitioners to adopt 'a critical approach' to the teaching of critical thinking, and in this warns against the adopting of 'reductive and exclusivist' approaches (p.72). An effort has been made in the paper to heed this advice – to explore the richness of the concept, and to suggest ways that it can be coherently applied to EAP curricula and teaching.

Definitions of critical thinking: so what is it?

In the teaching of critical thinking, there are arguably two issues when it comes to defining the concept. One is an abundance, or even an overabundance, of definitions; the other, paradoxically, is a lack of them. On the latter, it is often commented that academics on their courses are notoriously vague about what they mean when they insist to students that they must be 'critical' in their studies. On this, Dwight Atkinson notes:

> ....academics normally considered masters of precise definition seem almost unwilling or unable to define critical thinking. Rather they often appear to take the concept on faith, perhaps as a self-evident foundation of Western thought – such as freedom of speech (Atkinson, 1997, p.74).

Others see the challenge in similar terms: 'Because [critical thinking] is learned intuitively, it is easy [for academics] to recognise, like a face or a personality, but it is not so easily defined and it is not at all simple to explain' (Fox, 1994, p.125). In these contexts, the idea of critical thinking can become a source of confusion, even anxiety for students.

The other problem is an issue of too many definitions. Many of these have appeared over the years, especially out of what is known as the 'critical thinking movement', an education initiative to emerge out of the US in the 1980s and '90s, partly as a response to widespread perceptions of declining academic levels among students. It is noted in passing that such has been the proliferation of this movement that some have been led to cynically dub it 'the critical thinking industry' (Barnett, 2000).

Some of the better known definitions to emerge from this period, and which continue to be influential, include critical thinking as:

▸ **'reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do' (Robert Ennis, 1987)**

▸ **'skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgement' (Matthew Lipman, 1988)**

▸ **'the educational cognate of rationality', and a critical thinker as 'the individual who is appropriately moved by reasons' (Harvey Siegel, 1988)**

Significantly, some thinkers have been strongly 'critical' of these overarching, generic accounts. John McPeck, for example, an important alternative voice, insists that the problem with such definitions is that they do not acknowledge that critical thinking is not some unitary set of skills, but that it often

varies according to the field one is studying in. Thus, McPeck's (1990) definition of critical thinking as:

'the appropriate use of reflective scepticism within the problem area under consideration'

Another type of critique, one advanced especially by a range of feminist writers, questions the highly rational and 'logistical' nature of some of these generic definitions, which, it is suggested, shuts out alternative ways of knowing – such as 'empathic approaches to knowledge (e.g Walters, 1994; Clinchy, 1994).

For EAP practitioners, it can be difficult to navigate through these different, alternative accounts. What's needed is a definition that does not limit and reduce the concept, but nevertheless has sufficient focus to provide a basis for a broad pedagogical approach. The following, developed out of US Writing and Composition circles (CWPM, 2014), seems a satisfactory reconciling of these competing views and needs.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse, synthesise, interpret and evaluate ideas, information, situations and texts.

The broadness of this definition is evident in its outlining of a range of cognitive modes – analysing, synthesising, interpreting and evaluating – and also in the ranges of entities to which this thinking can be directed – ideas, information, situations and text.

Different approaches to the teaching of critical thinking

Along with different definitions of critical thinking are different approaches to how and what should be taught. These derive from quite different intellectual traditions, some from within philosophy, some from more sociological or anthropological traditions, and some from within psychology and learning theory. For the EAP teacher, it is not necessary to choose between these approaches. All can be accommodated within an EAP programme, though which are given emphasis will depend on the nature of programmes, as well as one's own priorities and orientations.

Critical thinking as a generic skill

The generic skills idea conceives of critical thinking as a finite set of cognitive operations, and as ones that have applicability across social and academic domains. This version of critical thinking, which links with traditions of analytical philosophy and logic, is the one most associated with the critical thinking movement referred to earlier. Thus, one of the key figures in this movement, Robert Ennis (1987), outlines the following as some of the key skills that students need to learn. These revolve around judging the adequacy of various entities – statements, conclusions, lines of reasoning:

1	grasping the meaning of statements
2	judging whether there is ambiguity in a line of reasoning
3	judging whether certain statements contradict each other
4	judging whether a conclusion necessarily follows
5	judging whether a statement by an alleged authority is acceptable

Significantly, Ennis and other figures from this group, Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and Peter Facione, hold that once learned in these contexts, such skills are readily transferable to other domains of inquiry.

Within EAP, the generic approach has a natural kind of appeal. This is particularly the case in programmes run on a generalist basis (i.e. English for General Academic Purposes), where classes are made up of students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and where the content-base of classes needs to be of a general kind. The influence of the approach can be seen in the

following sample activity taken from *EAP Now!* (Cox & Hill, 2004) (Figure 1). In such exercises, students are typically required to assess the quality of simple (and largely decontextualised) statements and arguments.

Task A: Critical thinking – what constitues strong/weak evidence?

Look at the following extracts from texts and then:

- Underline the evidence in each.
- Decide which evidence is strong and which is weak. Think about your reasons.
- With other students, compare your answers and discuss your reasons

1. Another reason that women are better than men at raising children is that they are kinder. My mother was a good example. She did many kind things not only for me but also for many other people she met, including strangers

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Figure 1: Sample EAP materials – 'skills' approach (Cox & Hill, 2004).

A related generic strand, but one coming from a different educational tradition is Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Here there is an attempt to generalise thinking in the academy as a hierarchy of different types – ranging from lower order forms of thinking (simple comprehension of information and knowledge) to higher order forms (analysis, synthesis, evaluation). The Bloom schema is used especially as a way of conceptualising tasks and activities within curricula (including within EAP), and to ensure a progressive movement from these lower order operations to more complex ones. Bloom is especially useful for delineating those tasks that require only the reproducing of knowledge (e.g. rote learning and memorisation), and those that require different types of judgment on the part of the thinker.

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Critical thinking as disciplinary discourse

An alternative to conceiving of critical thinking as a general and universal set of skills is to see them as being quite specific, and as ones that are dependent on the field one is working in. Thus, the critical thinking that a scientist needs to apply is thought to be different in important ways from that relied upon in say, the arts and humanities. This idea, which we saw in the McPeck definition earlier, has foundations in different intellectual traditions, including in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958), and his concept of different 'language games', and in the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz (1983), and his idea of 'local knowledges'.

In language studies, such a view has found full expression in that area known as disciplinary discourses. This field, developed over the last three decades by well-known scholars such as John Swales, Chris Candlin, Ken Hyland, Anne Johns and others has had an enormous influence on EAP.

A central concern in their work is the variable ways that arguments in different disciplines are developed and expressed in discourse. As they explain:

[In disciplinary cultures] there are strong boundaries defining membership and initiation, variations in knowledge, structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies and discourses, differing standards of rhetorical intimacy (Candlin, Bhatia and Hyland, 1997, p.25).

In EAP work, this perspective is seen in common activities that require students to analyse samples of academic texts – and specific features of these texts – from different disciplines. In relation to specific 'critical' features, these include variable expressions of voice, both explicit (*I argue; it will be argued*) and implicit (e.g. *clearly*); evaluative language, both inscribed (*a flawed argument*), and evoked (*an argument that you could run a truck through*), forms of hedging and boosting.

Although this disciplinary discourse approach is highly regarded in the profession, it is not always so easily implemented. As noted, EAP programmes are often of a generalist kind, and even when there is some discipline-based allocation of classes, this is often only at some very broad level e.g. STEM based, or combined business and social science classes. In these contexts, the best method is to provide students with a framework through which to investigate these features.

Critical thinking as a social project

A third strand is one whose critical concerns are broadly societal ones, and especially of social practices and conditions that are seen to be unjust or oppressive in some way. This type of criticality has historical connections with Marx's distinctive activist take on critique – 'not so much to interpret the world, but to change it'' (Thesis 11: 'Theses on Feuerbach', 1845). The education cognate of this position is 'critical pedagogy', made famous in the work of scholar–practitioners such as Paulo Freire and Henri Giroux. Drawing on the spirit of Marx's project, Giroux (2011) speaks of this type of approach as: 'one that stresses the need for teachers and students to actively challenge and transform knowledge, rather than simply consume it'.

In EAP pedagogy, such an approach has come to prominence as a counter to what are deemed 'pragmatic' approaches – that is, ones where students are typically introduced in an uncritical way to 'the standards, conventions, rules and discourse practices' of the academy (Pennycook, 1997). Within this critical paradigm, these standards, conventions etc. are made the object of scrutiny.

This approach has been systematically developed by Sarah Benesch (2001) in her advocacy for a 'critical English for Academic Purposes'. The key motif in Benesch's schema is to encourage students to assess their options in particular academic situations – for example, whether to take up the prescriptions of a genre – as opposed to simply fulfilling the academic expectations required of them. As she suggests, 'after considering options, students may choose to carry out demands, or [they may] challenge them' (p.64). To enable students to develop this strong critical voice requires, among other things, that curricula are built around contents and themes that draw on students' own experiences, and which 'connect strongly with their lives'.

A related, but different version, of this type of critical pedagogy is 'critical literacy', also common among some EAP practitioners (Soares & Wood, 2010; Wallace, 1999). Here the focus is not on practices and texts of the academy, but on those in society generally, including media and political discourses (newspapers, advertisements, leaflets, textbooks). A key part of the approach is to provide students with strategies to interpret and deconstruct texts, with the aim of identifying their underlying motivations and ideologies, as shown in the sample questions in Figure 2.

1	What kind of person wrote this text? What interest and values do they have?
2	How are different types of people represented in the text? What view of the world does the text create?
3	Who is the text written for – and for what purpose(s)?
4	What beliefs and actions does the writer want readers to adopt?
5	How could the text be read differently by a person different from you e.g. of a different gender, ethnic background, class?
6	How is power expressed in this text?

Figure 2: Questions students can use to evaluate texts – 'Critical literacy' approach

Critical reflection

A final strand is that area known as critical reflection. Whereas the other forms of critique discussed are directed at certain entities in the world – whether practices, situations, texts etc. – this type of critique is significant for being directed inward on the self, to the thinking and acting subject. This approach has particular resonances with the phenomenological tradition, the central tenet of which is that the mind is never a tabula rasa, but that our thoughts and responses to things are shaped by the mental apparatus of our beliefs, values, biases and assumptions etc. Critical reflection around these precepts involves developing awareness of what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) has called the unavoidable 'prejudices' of our thought, and also an appreciation that others will invariably bring their own distinct understandings and perspectives to a given situation.

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In the context of education, critical reflection is strongly associated with the ideas of John Dewey, whose view was that genuine learning only happens as a result of active and critical reflection upon one's experiences – hence his famous adage: 'We do not learn from experience… we learn from reflecting on experience'.

In language learning, this notion finds particular expression in the area of learning strategies, where students are led to interrogate their ways of doing things – their practices – as a basis for developing and improving on

these (e.g. how they approach the reading of texts, or go about composing them). The following types of questions are typically used in this approach (Figure 3).
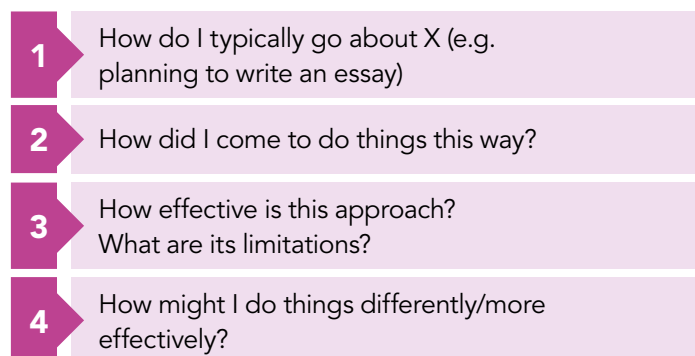
1	How do I typically go about X (e.g. planning to write an essay)
2	How did I come to do things this way?
3	How effective is this approach? What are its limitations?
4	How might I do things differently/more effectively?

Figure 3: Critical reflection on individual practices / approaches

Significantly this type of 'reflective practice' activity (see Donald Schön, 1986) has become more common across the academy, as undergraduate education becomes increasingly framed in vocational and experiential terms. And as a genre, it also has relevance to us as EAP professionals, as we constantly interrogate and seek to develop and improve upon our own practices.

Varieties of critical thinking explained

We have seen a variety of approaches that come under the broad umbrella of critical thinking teaching, all of which are relevant to EAP teaching. These were critical thinking: i) as a generic skill; ii) as a disciplinary discourse; iii) as a social project; and iv) as reflection on practice.

A way to understand this variety is to recognise that there are many different things that we can be critical about. Thus, in the account of Robert Ennis, there was a focus on the judging and evaluating of statements; among the critical theorists, the focus was mainly on social and institutional practices; within the critical reflection paradigm, it was on an individual's own practices. This variety is also evident in our preferred definition, shown earlier viz, critical thinking as 'the ability to analyse, synthesise, interpret and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts'.

Such lists however, are by no means exhaustive. Other entities, not mentioned here can also be posited – e.g. methodologies within research contexts, or policies and actions in the case of management or government contexts. Thus, in the standard assignment rubric mentioned earlier – Critically evaluate X – it is clear that X can stand for quite a range of things. We can also recognise that the approach to this evaluation, and the criteria that are brought to bear on this evaluation, will vary depending on the nature of what is being evaluated (Moore, 2011).

An example of variation in critical thinking

These ideas can be demonstrated in the following two sample essay tasks, both of which are concerned with the theme of poverty and social inequality in society (Figures 4 & 5). The first topic, designated a 'social issues' essay, is a type of writing task typically set at pre-tertiary level. The second task is from a different context, set in a Sociology subject at first year university level.

Key to understanding these topics is recognising what type of critical judgment students need to make in each case, and crucially what these judgments need to be of – their respective objects of evaluation. In the case of the social issues essay (Figure 4), the central object is a 'problem / situation' (the problem of poverty and social inequality), and the judgment students are called upon to make is an evaluation of its 'seriousness'. In the second part of the task ('Do governments do enough?'), there is a shift to a different object of evaluation – the actions of government. In this instance students need to make a judgment about whether they think these actions are sufficient. Also implied in this part of the question, especially if the student's judgment is a negative one, is the need to consider what additional measures governments might pursue to address the issue.

As outlined in the task, to develop a critical response here, students need to refer to a range of prescribed readings. It's worth noting in passing that such a task has much in common with those set on tests of written English (such as the IELTS test), though in the latter instance, the information-base of tasks is typically not prescribed readings, but rather the writer's extant knowledge and experience.

> Poverty and social inequality are seen by some as a serious challenge for societies. How serious a **problem** is this in your view? Do governments do enough, in your view, to address this problem? (Base your answer on the readings provided.)

Figure 4: Social issues essay

> Poverty and social inequality are seen by some as a serious challenge for societies. What are some of the ways sociologists have viewed the causes of poverty and social inequality? Which of these **perspectives** do you find the most persuasive?
> Please refer to the handout: 'Evaluating theories and perspectives in sociology'

Figure 5: Sociology essay

The second essay task, from the university level first year sociology subject, is concerned with the same thematic content, but as can be seen, it requires students to probe a quite different aspect of the issue. They are not asked to comment here on the problem (or phenomenon) as such, but rather on the different ways it has been viewed by sociologists – specifically the different 'perspectives' that have been developed to explain this phenomenon. (In the sociology literature, these would include, for example, more structural social perspectives or more individual-oriented perspectives).

This difference in the objects of evaluation across the two tasks has been characterised in the linguistics literature (Halliday, 1994) as a contrast between phenomena (referring to real world, material entities e.g. actions, situations, events, states-of affairs etc.) and metaphenomena (referring to abstract 'non-material', textual entities

e.g. propositions, arguments, theories explanations). Because the latter are quite different types of entities to consider, the types of judgments that need to be made of them are also different.

Thus, in the sociology task, students need to make judgments about the value of the different perspectives considered in the first part of the task (their 'persuasiveness'). We can recognise that this is a quite specific judgment-type, and, on the face of it, a more complex one than that required in the social issues task (Moore et al., 2018).

The differences between these two tasks are summarised in Table 1. There are several lessons to take away from this type comparison. One is that, in the critical activities we ask our students to engage in, a useful first step is to recognise what it is exactly we are asking them to be critical about, whether it's a problem or a theory, or the other possible types of entities we have seen – arguments, beliefs, policies, actions, behaviours, experiences. And following on from this, we need to be aware of:

- the types of judgments we are asking students to make exactly as they relate to these entities (is it the seriousness of something? Or how persuasive something is? Or other types of criteria etc.).

- the bases on which we are expecting them to arrive at such judgments – will these be based on their extant knowledge and experience? On prescribed readings? On certain discipline-based knowledge / protocols etc.

ESSAY TASK	KEY OBJECT OF EVALUATION	NATURE OF EVALUATION	KNOWLEDGE BASIS FOR MAKING EVALUATION
1. Social issues essay	Problem of poverty and social inequality (Phenomenon)	Seriousness of problem?	Reference to provided readings / extant knowledge, experience
2. Sociology essay	Perspectives on problem of poverty and social inequality (Metaphenomenon)	Persuasiveness of perspective?	Application of discipline-based knowledge / protocols

Table 1: Analysis of critical thinking elements in two writing tasks

Such an approach may seem technical; however, it is a way for us to get a reading on those critical thinking tasks we set for students, and also on those they will subsequently encounter in their studies – including the relative complexity of these tasks. Implied in this type of analysis is very much a situated approach to the teaching of critical thinking – one that starts with the types of tasks and activities we would normally want our students to be engaged in on an EAP programme (e.g. writing essays, participating in class debates, analysing texts), and from this seeks to identify the critical practices inherent in these tasks. For students, such a framework provides a type of meta-understanding of critical practices, one they can use to interpret the tasks and topics they will need to undertake in their studies. The type of analysis shown in Table 1 is a useful protocol to take students through with any academic task they are engaged in.

Genre and critical thinking: critical reviews, essays, research genres

On one level critical thinking is a type of cognition'– an activity or process that happens in the mind of the thinker, and which is directed at whatever one is inclined (or instructed) to be critical about (the object of evaluation). But it isn't enough to think of the process only in this way – just as a type of thinking. In the world of human interactions, our critical thoughts only become real though their expression via some form of discourse, whether this be spoken or written, or in other modes – visual, bodily. On this point, Dwight Atkinson (1999) suggests that critical thinking can only be understood as some kind of 'enacted discursive practice'.

In academic study, these practices find expression in the spoken and written genres that characterise university study. Different genres typically entail different types of critical practices and judgments, and so at the core of any EAP programme needs to be the construction of a range of well selected assessment tasks – ones that give students an opportunity to be engaged in a variety of critical activities (critiquing a text, using a theory, developing an argument), and which also help them to recognise the diversity of practices implied in the term's use. It is the discursive nature of being critical that has led some in the field to prefer the term 'critical writing' to critical 'thinking' (Caposella, 1993).

The critical review

One genre that is central to the idea of critique is the review article (or critical review). The first thing to say about this genre is that its object of evaluation – what the critique is directed at – is a text, though what type of text this is can vary a good deal, e.g. books, book chapters, journal articles, magazine articles, opinion pieces. It needs to be noted too that within particular discipline areas, this object can involve quite distinct types of artefacts, e.g. paintings, film, music, buildings. While the principles of critique writing are broadly the same in these areas, the bases on which such artefacts are evaluated will of course differ considerably.

In an EAP syllabus, the critique genre is likely to have a key place. Because the purpose of the genre is so clearly one of critique, it provides a good vehicle for teaching some of the key discursive aspects of critical writing. One of these is its structural components. Broadly, any critique text is made up of two key constituent parts: a summary of the contents of the source text, and an evaluation of this content, usually both its positive and negative aspects.

John Swales (2004) has identified the following as the qualities of a good summary:

- It should offer a balanced coverage of the original.
- It should present the source material in a neutral fashion.
- It should condense the source material and be presented 'in the writer's own words

Significantly, a key part of being critical in this genre is actually holding off on one's critique until what exactly is being evaluated has been clearly and fairly laid out for the reader. Students will often need guidance in such methods. These link invariably to the teaching of reading skills, and the need to provide students with strategies for comprehending and interpreting the contents of texts.

A broad framework that can be used here involves a series of probe questions, each concerned with a different level of the contents. These relate to: the general subject area the text covers; the specific issue(s) with which it is concerned; the central idea or argument being advanced; what evidence is provided to support this argument. As shown in Figure 6, the approach involves moving from broad macro-understandings of a text, to identifying its more specific details.
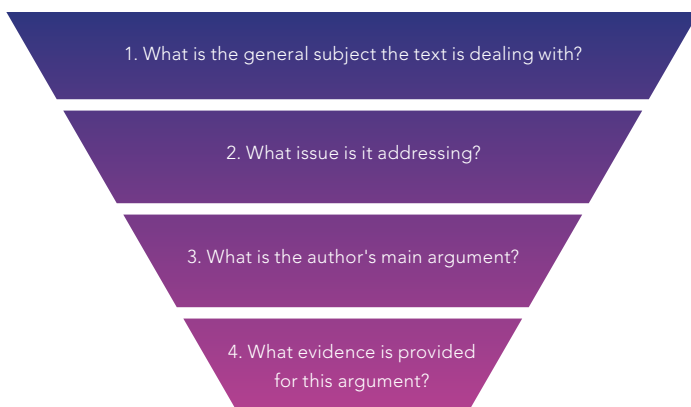

1. What is the general subject the text is dealing with?

2. What issue is it addressing?

3. What is the author's main argument?

4. What evidence is provided for this argument?

Figure 6: A framework for the interpretation of texts

The following sample summary – of a chapter from a popular text about communication technologies (Turkle, 2000) – demonstrates how these probes used in the reading process can be explicitly drawn upon in the writing and structuring of a summary (Figure 7a). Much is made in the literature of the key role played by reporting verbs and expressions in the summarising of texts (see highlighted examples of these in the text: *argues*, *claims*, *states*). These have the important function of creating a critical distance between the reviewer and the ideas contained in the source text (Thompson and Yiyun, 1990), so opening the way for the subsequent evaluation of these ideas.

In her book *Alone Together* the author Sherry Turkle **explores** the effect of communication technologies on human relations. Her **central argument** is that while it may appear these technologies have put people more in touch with each other, the effect paradoxically is the reverse. 'We are increasingly connected to each other',' she **states**, 'but oddly more alone: in our intimacy, increasingly there is solitude' (p.19). At the core of her book are interviews with multiple users of these technologies. Turkle **quotes** many of these stories to **illustrate** her case. For example…

Figure 7a: Extract from summary section of sample critical review

It is difficult to generalise about the bases on which texts are evaluated, and these have been shown to vary in different disciplinary contexts (Hyland, 2000). A general evaluative framework that can be used on EAP programmes is one that draws on the reading framework described above (Figure 6). Students thus can be encouraged to consider:

- the quality of ideas / arguments they have identified in the text (e.g. Are the ideas interesting? practical? consistent? relevant? clearly expressed?)
- the quality of the evidence they have identified to support these ideas (e.g. What kind of evidence is presented? Is it adequate? Is it used in a fair way? Does counterevidence exist to cast doubt on the claims being made?)

The following is a sample of evaluation of the Turkle text summarised in Figure 7b. As with most review texts, it provides both praise and criticism of the source text, though, it will be noted, the praise expressed in the first paragraph is somewhat muted. All the specific evaluative comments contained within the sample can be related to the evaluative questions outlined above – for example, there are positive comments about the interest and relevance of the ideas, and negative ones about the use of evidence, including the review's introduction of counterevidence).

> Turkle's argument is an interesting and challenging one. She manages to draw on numerous real life stories to vividly illustrate her points. Many of these stories are familiar ones that capture well the frustration and annoyance we often feel when confronted with unsociable uses of digital communications.
>
> There are some problems however, with her account. One of these is the way evidence is used in the book. Of the many stories Turkle quotes, virtually all recount some personally dissatisfying experience. One gets the impression that Turkle is only interested in the negatives of the virtual world, and so the work can be criticized for presenting a one-sided (or biased) view of the matter. Contrary to Turkle's view, there is research that demonstrates how many people use the online world not to replace their face-to-face relationships, but rather to supplement and enhance these relationships (Pollet 2010).
>
> Another issue is ….

Figure 7b: Extract from evaluation section of sample critical review

As with all genre-based pedagogies, much is to be gained from having students work with sample texts like this; especially in this case for them to understand the 'critical' elements of the genre, and to recognise how these can be drawn upon in their own writing.

The academic essay

The academic essay, a long term staple in undergraduate education around the world, is recognised as a genre exceptionally well-suited to the development of the qualities of intellectual judgment and critical thought. There are some interesting connections to draw between this genre and the critical review considered in the previous section. Where the critical review requires evaluation of the arguments and evidence of a source text, in the essay genre it is the writer who must advance the argument and also support this with appropriate evidence.

The academic essay, a long term staple in undergraduate education around the world, is recognised as a genre exceptionally well-suited to the development of the qualities of intellectual judgment and critical thought.

And to close the circle, the subsequent assessment of a student's essay (by the teacher) functions in effect as a form of critical review of this work, one often based on the type of evaluative criteria seen in the critique genre (e.g. the quality of the student's argument). There is also the possibility in the connection between the two genres, for students to draw on their understandings of critique to conduct their own self- and peer-assessment of essay work produced in class.

An abundance of material and sources is available to the EAP practitioner on the critical elements of essay writing. One of the more comprehensive and insightful of these is Gordon Taylor's *A Student's Writing Guide: How to Plan and Write Successful Essays* (Taylor, 2009). Taylor characterises the critical thinking in essay writing as 'justified judgement', which needs to be distinguished, he says, from the offering of

mere 'opinion' – ideas that are 'unsupported by reason and evidence'. Developing these judgements, he says, involves entering into a debate – first with the question to hand, and then with the sources and ideas one uses to explore this question. It is out of this engagement that one's justified judgment emerges.

In university contexts, the starting point in this process is normally a question. In coming to grips with essay questions, Taylor suggests, students should be encouraged at the outset to explore what a range of a possible responses might be and also, significantly, to commit provisionally at an early stage to one of these. Such an approach, he suggests, fits with established knowledge building practices, such as hypothesis formulation and testing, or what philosopher Karl Popper has referred to as working with 'conjecture'. The point is, Taylor explains, such judgments are at this point unjustified ones, but provide a focus and starting point for one's engagement with the topic. Through the processes of reading, reflection and writing, such prejudgments (or prejudices) need to be interrogated. As Taylor explains, this will lead to the refinement and elaboration of the argument, or to a modification of it, or in the light of contrary evidence and material, the dispensing of the original 'conjecture' and the development of a wholly different argument.

In the following topic, one picking up on the theme covered in the Turkle (2011) text discussed previously, a range of possible responses can be envisaged.

Has social media improved the quality of human relationships in society?

These might include more absolutist positions:

- NO! Social media has had only negative effects on the quality of relationships OR

- YES! Social media has been wholly positive in the effects it has had on relationships

Another type of response is one that considers both sides of the issue, but in some neutral and uncommitted way.

- Social media has had both positive and negative effects on the quality of relationships

Such positions – either the more extreme polar positions, or the neutral, centralist position – are generally not favoured in academic discourse, though they can be in other contexts. The former, for example, is characteristic of polemical discourses.

What make for more credible arguments in academic study are those that consider both sides of an issue, but which ultimately make a commitment either way. Significantly, such arguments are often structured around the grammatical function of subordination, where prominence is given to one of two contrasting propositions, via the use of some subordinating term or expression (e.g. connectives such as *while*, *although*, *however*).
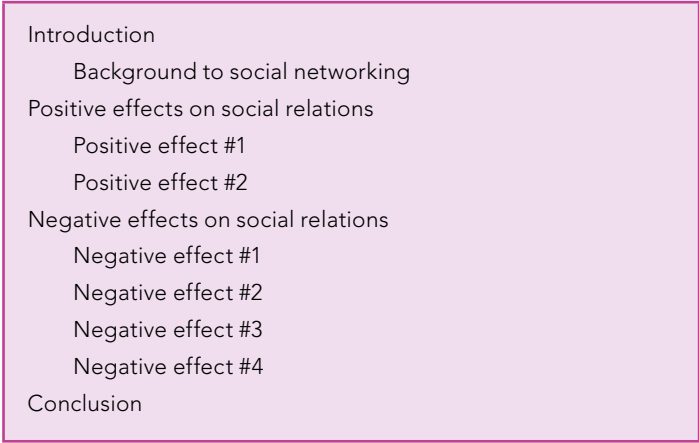
In relation to the sample topic, several options immediately present themselves:

- *WHILE social media has had a number of positive effects on the quality of relationships in society, these are outweighed by the problems that these new technologies have brought.*

- *ALTHOUGH there are certainly some problems associated with social media, on balance it has done more to improve the way that people relate to each other.*

There are, however, many other possibilities, ones that go beyond a simple, literalist approach to the topic. The first additional sample below, for example, brings a temporal perspective to the topic; the second considers different uses.

- *In its early phases social media clearly had a positive effect on social relationships. HOWEVER, in its more recent developments, particularly with its increased commercialisation, it is difficult to see any positive influence.*

- Some specialised uses of social media have been beneficial to people. HOWEVER, the more common uses seem to have led to a deterioration in the quality of relationships.

Taylor, in his book, also mentions the textual challenges of the essay genre – how the development of an argument has eventually to be forged into a coherent whole. The principles of subordination can also be helpful for students as a way to think about the structuring of work. Thus, for an essay whose argument advanced the more negative view of social media, the simple structure shown in Figure 8 could serve as useful starting point for the organising of material. Similarly, arguing the more optimistic view – that is, emphasising the more sanguine effects of the technology – would see a reversal of these main components. For the more nuanced arguments suggested above, other adaptations to this structure would need to be made to allow the argument to come through coherently across the course of the essay. (A sample essay written on this topic is shown in the Appendix, along with some suggestions for how this can be used as a basis for classroom activities.)

Introduction
    Background to social networking
Positive effects on social relations
    Positive effect #1
    Positive effect #2
Negative effects on social relations
    Negative effect #1
    Negative effect #2
    Negative effect #3
    Negative effect #4
Conclusion

Figure 8: Provisional essay structure

This kind of preliminary work with students on their essay writing – which can often be done as a form of brainstorming – is important as a way of emphasising that there are no right answers for the questions that are set; rather, only well justified, supported and structured arguments. Also important is giving students a sense that their essay writing is an opportunity to explore a topic in depth, and to provide their own personal, critical (and also creative) response to it. For them to be able to do this however, it is essential that they are given opportunities to write on topics that have relevance to

their lives, and which they have some critical investment in. The key issue of content is taken up in the next section.

Research genres: student thesis, research article or report

One other genre type, that will be mentioned only in passing, is the student thesis, or related research genres – the research article or report. EAP programmes that prepare students for postgraduate study will often need to provide guidance in this type of writing. The thesis genre, regardless of its scale – whether a minor thesis at Master's level or a full PhD – is arguably the critical genre par excellence. In the terminology of Taylor (2009), we can think of the genres as requiring 'justified judgements' at almost every turn – whether these relate to the research topic itself (and why this is a valid area to research in the first place); the research methods and analytical frameworks to be employed (and why these are thought suitable); the claims that are ultimately made for the research (and the evidential basis for this). In the examination of theses, a key criterion is how well the project and its different components have been 'justified', especially in the light of previous scholarship in the field. It is significant that the candidate's role in this assessment is characterised as a 'defence' of the work.

A conventional way to teach about the research genres is to consider separately their different components – Introduction; Literature reviews, Methods, Findings etc. (Swales and Feak 2004). To bring an explicitly critical approach to this teaching is to consider the types of judgments and decisions that need to be made in these different sections, and the justifications that are typically provided for them.

The role of content in the teaching of critical thinking

In the earlier discussion, we saw some opposition in the field between more generic skills approaches to critical thinking and more discipline-specific approaches. This raises a larger issue of the role of content in the teaching of critical thinking.

For those who advocate a skills approach, the view is that certain thinking skills are general and universal and therefore that the actual content used for the teaching of these is not significant. An instance that is often cited is the teaching of logical inferencing. Thus, while these principles can be demonstrated through the use of actual semantic content (e.g. men, mortality, Socrates, as shown in Figure 9a), significantly this can be done equally effectively, it is claimed, using words that are empty of semantic content (for example, the nonsense words used in Lewis Carrol's famous poem 'Jabberwocky' as shown below in Figure 9b).
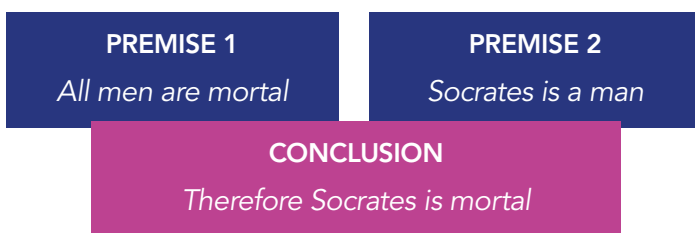
PREMISE 1	PREMISE 2
All men are mortal	*Socrates is a man*

CONCLUSION
Therefore Socrates is mortal

Figure 9a: Syllogism (semantic content)

PREMISE 1	PREMISE 2
All borogroves are mimsy	*Tove is a borogrove*

CONCLUSION
Therefore Tove is mimsy

Figure 9b: Syllogism (empty content)

This content-free approach may be valid for the teaching of certain skills of reason and logic. However, there are many areas of critical thinking where content is crucial and cannot be avoided. One such example is the area of problem solving – a key component of critical thinking. The skills approach to this area sees effective problem solving as the outcome of certain universal cognitive processes and habits of mind e.g. thinking laterally, being open to alternatives, breaking routine patterns of thinking and the like. An example of this approach is the work of popular author Edward De Bono (2017), where it is claimed such techniques have relevance across all domains, regardless of the nature of the problem to hand. Significantly, this generic approach is seen commonly in the work of some areas of management, especially management consultancy. It is also a key element of that recent education movement known as '21st-century skills'.

Many educationalists however, are unconvinced by such a view. Increasingly, it is held that effective solutions do not come from the application of certain universalist techniques. Rather, what's required in the first instance is well-developed schematic understandings of the particular problem area to hand – either pre-existent understandings, or those that come from research and reading in the area. This is known as field expertise, and includes knowing about such things as:

◆ **how best to frame the particular problem**

◆ **which solutions have already been attempted to solve it**

◆ **what alternatives are possible, as well as their anticipated consequences**

◆ **what constraints might apply to the implementation of any proposed solutions.**

Richard Willingham (2010), an influential scholar in this area, is one of number of advocates who insist on the primacy of domain knowledge in critical thinking and problem solving, but who also worries about its increasing trivialisation within some of the new education agendas.

Devising a 21st century skills curriculum requires more than paying lip service to content knowledge. Outlining the skills in detail, and merely urging content to be taught too is a recipe for failure. We must plan to teach skills in the context of knowledge and to treat both as equally important (p.18).

Such ideas are familiar ones in language and literacy education and have been explored comprehensively over the years under the banner of 'content-based instruction' (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Grabe and Stoller, 1997). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), commenting on the broad area of language development, have pointed out that the development of complexity in skills requires an initial foundation of knowledge.

All this points to the need to have a strong focus on reading in EAP programmes, and to aim to have students enter degree courses equipped with strong reading habits and practices. Significantly, when academics are quizzed about these matters, they report that it is those students who engage most with the reading requirements on courses, who are best able to bring a critical approach to material, and who are invariably more successful in their studies (Moore et al., 2012).

> All this points to the need to have a strong focus on reading in EAP programmes, and to aim to have students enter degree courses equipped with strong reading habits and practices.

Content and reading in EAP programmes

A focus on content raises questions about which topics and thematic areas can form the basis of an EAP programme. This is often a dilemma for practitioners, especially in those situations where classes are made up of students bound for a variety of disciplinary specialisms. Sarah Benesch (2001), as noted, insists that a strong critical voice for students can only be developed if this is in relation to ideas and themes that 'connect strongly with their lives'. A useful approach is to have students focus on issues and problems that are of immediate concern to them, and to frame their reading and research around these. Drawing

on the analysis above, students can investigate problem areas using (some of) the following questions as a guide (see Figure 10). Among other things, such an approach focuses on the creative dimensions of critical thinking – that is, drawing on one's critical analysis of a problem as a basis for generating appropriate solutions to it.

◆ **What's the problem? How is it best framed?**

◆ **What factors have led to the problem (causes)?**

◆ **What are some of the negative effects of the problem (consequences)?**

◆ **What solutions have been attempted? How adequate / inadequate have they been?**

◆ **What alternative solutions are available? Which is / are most promising?**

◆ **Which solution(s) would you propose?**

Figure 10: Problem-solution investigation – guide questions

A benefit of tasks such as this is that it allows students to research areas related to their own individual disciplinary interests. Such work can be presented in written form, but also lends itself particularly well to being presented in spoken form, where students share the outcomes of their investigations with fellow class members.

One final note needs to be made about reading and critical thinking. A major challenge nowadays is helping students to navigate and engage critically with the infinite resources available to them on the internet. This area is often overlooked in the critical thinking literature, but has become a staple in the growing field of 'critical information literacy' (Tewel, 2015). University libraries typically provide protocols for the evaluation of websites – including interrogation of such matters as authorship and ownership of sites (for example, whether these are individuals or organisations, and then what type of organisations); as well as the apparent agendas being run by them (for example, whether these are commercially or politically-motivated ones). In a growing world of 'fake news', and online scandals and outrages, developing this type of critical thinking in students seems especially crucial – not only in relation to their studies, but also to their lives and well-being in the wider world.

Final remarks: understanding the 'critical' challenges for our students

A final area – and also a contentious one – is whether the challenges students face in being critical in their studies are culturally related; that is, how much their abilities are shaped, and also constrained, by their educational experiences within their home culture. A popular line of inquiry is to identify significant differences in the epistemological and social foundations of thinking in different regions of the world, ones that are reflected in the nature of national education systems. Two notions are common in characterisations of non-western systems. One is a reliance on more 'reproductive' and 'non-critical' approaches to knowledge, evidenced in the emphasis placed on rote learning and mass-scale examinations. Another is the promulgation of more collectivist, less individualist views of knowledge, leading, among other things, to fewer strictures placed on practices of textual borrowing (citation, plagiarism etc.).

Such understandings, which have informed thinking in areas of EAP for some time, are viewed as the underlying reasons for why many international students have difficulty bringing the right critical approach to their studies (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991). In the good traditions of critical thinking, however, there has also been a strong challenge to such notions (e.g. Zamel, 1997; Ryan, 2013). One type of criticism is that these conceptions invariably have an ethnocentric tenor to them, with non-Western education systems typically defined in relation to what they are not. A related criticism is that such thinking leads unavoidably to a 'deficit' view of students. Some writers, such as John Biggs (2001), have also seriously contested the evidence that students from non-Western backgrounds perform less well in their studies in Western settings. The effects of globalisation and the increasing convergence of education systems around the world in recent years is another confounding factor.

The view increasingly is that students' background culture should be seen as a less-than-reliable basis for understanding the challenges they face in this aspect of their studies. What, however, remains a constant in EAP contexts, and which undoubtedly has a major bearing on students' experience of study, is a different aspect of their backgrounds – this is their language backgrounds, and the fact that in the Anglophone university, students have to be critical thinkers in a second language. We can identify two dimensions to the challenges here: one is the challenges for students in comprehending that which they are required to judge; the other is the challenges involved in expressing these judgments.

What however, remains a constant in EAP contexts, and which undoubtedly has a major bearing on students' experience of study, is a different aspect of their backgrounds – this is their language backgrounds, and the fact that in the Anglophone university, students have to be critical thinkers in a second language. We can identify two dimensions to the challenges here: one is the challenges for students in comprehending that which they are required to judge; the other is the challenges involved in expressing these judgments.

Robert Ennis (1987), in his taxonomy of critical thinking skills, lists as the first skill 'grasping the meaning of statements'. While this is a somewhat simplistic version of comprehension abilities, what's nevertheless recognised here is the primacy of this activity in any critical processes. Thus, it is axiomatically the case that one cannot be critical about something in any plausible or credible way if what is being judged has only been partially or dimly understood. In this way, we need to recognise that many of the difficulties students have in being critical – or coherently critical – arise in the first instance from basic comprehension difficulties. This reinforces the importance of having reading central in an EAP curriculum, and providing students with the strategies that will help them to 'grasp the meanings' with which they must contend.

Thus, it is axiomatically the case that one cannot be critical about something in any plausible or credible way if what is being judged has only been partially or dimly understood.

The other language-based challenge is having the means and resources to project the critical ideas and evaluations one wishes to express. The idea of critical 'voice' in academic writing is a complex one. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the prescriptions – and proscriptions – about the use of first person pronouns in texts. It is an irony that that most clear and distinct expression of individual cognition – 'I think' – is in many contexts thought to be inappropriate. It is an important mission in EAP not only to help students develop their critical responses about those things that are significant in their study and their lives, but also to give them the means to express these responses in ways that others can understand, and which ultimately can have an impact on the worlds they inhabit. In this way, we need to ensure in our teaching that critical thinking does not end up being a source of confusion, and even of anxiety, for students but becomes for them the creative and empowering idea it was always intended to be.

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Appendix: sample essay – social media

Text analysis exercises – identifying critical elements in an academic essay

The following essay was written on the subject of the effects of social media on relationships in society. The essay was written at undergraduate level and was generally rated highly by the lecturer who marked it. In the introduction, the essay's main argument is outlined:

This essay will argue that in the area of social and political awareness, social media has had a positive effect. In other areas of society, however, there is cause for some concern.

Exercise 1: Focus on essay structure

Read through the essay, and try to recreate the structure of the body section of the essay. In each section, identify whether the evaluation being made is positive or negative (or both)? How does this structure connect with the overall argument that is being advanced?

Introduction

Background to social media

Effects of social media

_____ (positive / negative evaluation?)

_____ (positive / negative evaluation?)

_____ (positive / negative evaluation?)

Conclusion

Exercise 2: Focus on arguments and evidence

In arguing this position, a number of claims are made about different uses of social media.

Look at the following claims made in the essay (**each is highlighted in the text of the sample essay**). What evidence is provided to support each claim? How persuasive do you find this evidence?

CLAIM 1: …social media can increase social awareness and lead to positive political change

EVIDENCE PROVIDED? _____

CLAIM 2: …interpersonal uses of social media have some worrying consequences

EVIDENCE PROVIDED? _____

CLAIM 3: There are drawbacks to the personal uses of social media

EVIDENCE PROVIDED? _____

Extension: Your ideas?

1. **Discussion:** What would be your response to the essay question? Has social media improved relationships in your view? Would you emphasise the positive or negative aspects of social media? Which areas would you focus on?

2. **Writing:** The essay was written some years ago – in 2013. Among other things, the student argued that:

   … in the area of social and political awareness, social media has had a positive effect

What would you argue about this point today? What evidence could you introduce to support your argument? Write several paragraphs as a response – be sure to use references.

Question: Has social media improved the quality of relationships in society? Write an essay of 1,500 words, clearly stating your view on the issue. Include at least ten references.

Social media has had a huge influence on society in the 21st century, enabling citizens to engage with each other in radically new and different ways. According to Brown (2011), we can fall in love online, create friendships, attend parties in other countries – all without leaving the comfort (and anonymity) of our armchair. And while the Generation Ys and Xs in our society are leading the adoption of social media, older generations are now catching up, with the strongest recent growth in usage among the 55 and 65 age group (Burbary 2010). So what does this apparent 'revolution' mean for society? How is social media changing the way people relate to each other, and can we say that it has led to an improvement in relationships? This essay will argue that in the area social and political awareness, social media has had a positive effect. In other areas of society however, there is cause for some concern.

Background to social media

The idea of a 'social network' is not new. A social network in fact refers to any structure made up of individuals (or organizations) tied to one another though some type of interdependency, such as friendship, common interest, financial exchange and so on (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 2011). What is radically new however, is web-based social networking (or media), which has allowed these networked structures to develop in much more extensive and elaborated ways. Nowadays, the main social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enjoy huge success, with Facebook ¬–the most successful of these – boasting more than 2.5 billion users worldwide.

The appeal of social media seems to vary. Some surveys point to more pragmatic social motives such as "staying in touch with friends, organising social activities, or flirting with someone" (Lenhart & Madden 2007, p.23). Other studies however, allude to deeper psychological needs such as the need for a sense of belonging, or the need to project one's identity (Ridings & Gefen 2004). Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, is sure that the chief appeal comes from social media's ability to empower people by giving them a 'voice'. He is also sure that this capacity has meant that his technological creation has been overwhelmingly a force for good.

> *When you give everyone a voice and give people power, the system usually ends up in a really good place. So, what we view our role as, is giving people that power (cited in Ali 2011).*

But is such a positive view of the impact of social media justified?

Effects of social networking on social relationships

In order to understand the effects that the new media have had on social relationships, it is necessary to break the term 'relationship' into three elements: relationships with the broader community, relationships with 'friends', and relationship with self.

In terms of the relationship with the broader (sometimes global) community, there is evidence to suggest **that the social media can increase social awareness and lead to positive political change**

(Shirky 2011). This has been evident in a number of popular struggles against repressive governments in recent years. In Iran, for example, social media became crucial in the revolt of the citizenry against the country's presidential elections held in 2009, and widely believed to be rigged. In response to the government's monopoly over conventional media (newspapers, television and radio), many Iranians turned to social media tools both to circulate alternative sources of news, and to organise a dramatic series of street demonstrations against the government (Carafano 2009). A similar dynamic was seen in the Egyptian revolution, where Facebook is acknowledged to have played a major role in organising the demonstrations that were eventually to bring down President Mubarak.

Clay Shirky, a major commentator on social media is very optimistic about the potential of the new media technologies to bring about important social change. Shirky (2008) suggests that the distinguishing feature of the new technologies is that they have moved beyond the 20th century paradigm of passive media consumption to one of active participation. This shift from consumption to action, Shirky argues, has the potential to free up human creativity, and to be a spur for major collective change: "Our social tools are not an improvement to modern society", he says; "they are a challenge to it" (Shirky 2008, p.25).

While social media has become justly famous in the world of politics and social struggle, its more common and widespread use is in the more local domain of personal relationships. In this area, we can also see many positive developments. On a basic level, social media sites have proven to be an efficient way of establishing and maintaining relationships with friends and relatives. A survey of US college students, for example, found that the most attractive feature of Facebook was its ability to help users track down old school friends (Pempek et al. 2009). Another powerful use in this area is the development of networks around shared interests and circumstances (e.g. musical interests). It is also significant in supporting close communities in the area of self-help, for example, among sufferers of particular medical conditions (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2005).

But these **interpersonal uses of social media also have some worrying consequences**. Some studies have shown that the quality of relationships with friends can deteriorate where social media has replaced face-to-face communication (Kujath 2011). There is the suggestion also that in spite of the greater interconnectedness they create, social-media sites like Facebook can in fact leave some people feeling more lonely and isolated (Cacioppo & Patrick 2009). As Cacioppo and Patrick (2009, p.46) explain: "For people who are already feeling lonely, Facebook status updates are just a reminder of how much better everyone else is at making friends and having fun".

An area of particular concern in social relationships is cyberbullying. While bullying behavior among peers has always been a part of society, it seems that social media creates opportunities for this to happen in particularly intense ways. This is attributed to certain characteristics inherent in online technologies, including the ability to remain anonymous, as well as its networking capacity, which allows bullies to gang up on victims in a much more relentless manner than in face-to-face situations (Patchin 2008). The potentially damaging effects of this use of social media have been seen in a number of high profile cases, including that of Ryan Halligan, a thirteen year old school boy in the US, who was driven to suicide after receiving repeated instant messages from school classmates accusing him of being gay. A US survey found that as many as 40% of college students reported experiencing some form of cyberbullying (Patchin 2008).

A final area to consider is the effect that social media has on relationships with the 'self'. One of the interesting features of social media sites such as Facebook, is that they give users an opportunity to shape and construct their social identity. Some writers see this as a positive development. Thus, it is suggested that social media gives people much more control over their self-appearance than in face-to-face communication, allowing them to project a positive image of themselves to the world (Kramer & Winter 2008). This 'control' makes the social media world particularly attractive to shy and introverted people, who may have difficulty expressing their identity in regular off line relationships (Aubrey et al. 2008).

There are drawbacks however, to this personal use of social media. Some writers are critical, for example, of the way that social media draws users into having such a strong focus on themselves and their personal identities (Rosen, 2007). The concern is that social media sites offer a vehicle for self-promotion and vanity, leading to a self-centred and ultimately selfish outlook on the world (Buffardi & Campbell, 2010). In an interesting study, Buffardi and Campbell (2010) found that people with 'narcissistic' personality traits tended to be the greatest users of social media. There is growing evidence too that increased social media use leads to heightened levels of depression among young people (Jelenchick et al. 2013).

Overall social media's effect on social relations seems to be a mixed one. While one can point to many benefits it has brought, especially in the area of political engagement and activism, there are some areas in our personal relationships where the influence has not been a positive one. Perhaps the area of most concern is the phenomenon of cyberbullying which points to a worrying deterioration in social relationships. One certainty though, is that social media is now embedded in the social fabric, and its influence and usage is only likely to grow. The challenge for society will be to keep pace with this change, and to try to ensure that this new kind of 'voice' granted to citizens is an affirming and mutually-respectful one. As social media becomes more and more a part of our lives, it will be interesting to see how this challenge is met.

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