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**Guidance on
Being Critical**

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Guidance on Being Critical

Amongst the essential criteria for all assessment submitted within the Professional Development Programme, is evidence of critical thinking. These notes set out some of the essential features of being critical when considering literature and issues. They do not attempt to be exhaustive, and students should look for relevant reading to back up these ideas, as well as discussing the issues raised with their personal tutors.

Academic criticism means exploring an issue or topic in an objective way; it means carefully analysing issues in a way that recognises all the factors that affect it, whether they appear positive, negative or contextual. Good academic writing is based on analysis, and recognises that any exploration of a topic raises questions. It is your exploration of these questions and your attempts to explain the beliefs and ideas that underpin them that marks out good critical writing. Above all, being critical means voicing an opinion; it is not acceptable for you to analyse without explaining your own position. Patty (2001) summarises these points noting that it is the analysis of the literature that allows a writer to establish and explain their own position.

To be able to think critically about a topic, you must have something to think about. Since critical thinking requires a reasonable level of content knowledge, it is important to read widely around the topic which you are writing and thinking about. (See separate Guidance Notes on Reading). These notes assume you have already done the necessary reading.

The critical thinking process is a question-guided process. Students often have difficulty in:

- asking appropriate question about their topic;
- finding and/or developing appropriate answers to those questions, and;
- Presenting their findings in appropriate ways.

These are some suggestions for strategies to help you think critically

1. Write down everything you know about the topic (a concept map may be a useful format for this). Remember to be as inclusive as you can at this stage.
2. Note where you have significant literature that relates to the topic either through agreement, disagreement or illumination. If you find areas where you have no significant literature, then use this as a point for further research.
3. Re-organise the material into categories or groupings, by asking, “How do these things fit together? What elements are related and how are they related? What general groupings are there?”
4. Ask, “What is the significance of all this? What can it be used for? What are its implications for me as a teacher (or professional involved in Education)?”

5. Look for dissonance. Ask, “is there anything that doesn’t fit, or that doesn’t agree with the facts, with other theories on the topic, or with my personal experience?”
6. Don’t just think -- Write down every thought you have.
7. Above all, note the issues and questions that occur to you as you read; sometimes these questions are the most valuable part of the reading process, helping you shape your own views on a topic and leading you into a deeper analysis of the topic.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- you don’t want to forget what you thought;
- you will be able to retrace the steps you took to get an idea, so you can learn to deliberately apply the same steps in the future when you are faced with a similar problem;
- You will have a pile of raw material with which to work -- good ideas often come from apparently trivial or insignificant ideas.

When using the material you have gathered in written assignments, always remember that there are three essential elements to writing critically. There are the supportive and dissonant elements (sometimes called the pros and cons) of the topic being considered. The third element, which is sometimes forgotten, is the context in which the topic is being examined.

An example of this may be your examination of how a teacher manages children’s behaviour in a classroom. You may feel that the positive elements are that the children are all on task, that the classroom is quiet and that the teacher is very obviously in control. The dissonant elements may be your feeling that the methodology employed is inhumane, with the teacher emphasising the negative behaviour and treating it comparatively harshly by excluding children from the classroom. The context for this discussion which is an essential part of understanding the topic, could well be the unfavourable OFSTED Inspection report which saw the school as failing to control children. This has meant the teachers feeling that they have to employ more rigid methodologies than they may prefer.

If your discussion left this final contextual element out of the picture, it would be possible to see the teachers as over-punitive and inhumane. By seeing the discussion within the context, we see the teachers as professionals trying to make sense of an externally ordered view of the world that has little understanding of the collective philosophy of the school.

One of the most effective ways to develop your critical skills is through reading critical writing. It is essential to have as wide a variety of issues and topics from which to choose your essay themes. For these reasons reading is seen as the underpinning resource of your study. The examples given in the bibliography below are only indicative; it is essential to build up a good selection of critical reading that relates to the areas you are interested in. When keeping your record of literature up to date, it is worth considering some indicator such as a keyword, which will remind you of exemplars of good critical writing.

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