
Critical engagement with discursive texts

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I wrote the following to encourage small groups to make critical sense of articles and papers. I also believe that it can be used by individuals perhaps working in isolation. Many FE students also work in a professional context. When they do I believe that this should enhance their ability to critically engage with texts.

So, whether you are part of a group of face-to-face learners or in isolation communicating on-line I hope this helps you to engage critically with words that too often we are expected not to criticise.

Holding a critical conversation

If you wish to engage in critical professional conversation based upon any discursive pieces of writing you might find what follows to be useful. It is merely an aid to help structure and stimulate conversation and I suggest that you use it or adapt it or think of something that serves you better. It could possibly contribute to the establishment or examination of some professional values, particularly for educators but possibly for others as well. If you think that my tone in what follows is overly teacherly I can only apologise.

1. Assertion

Try to pick out three instances where the text depends upon assertion alone and where no or inadequate evidence is provided in support. Be prepared to explain your selections to others. You might, for example, feel that a point being made can only be justified as opinion which you can take or leave; you might feel that the opinion is accompanied by a qualification which makes it more worthy of consideration; you might feel that the point being made can stand as a fact if it can be verified; you might feel that the point is not worth making and should have been left out; and you might feel that the point claims more than can be justified on the basis of the evidence presented to you. You do not have to agree or disagree with the assertions. You might even strongly agree with them but still feel that evidence is lacking.

2. Agree/Disagree

Pick out three points in the text with which you most strongly agree and three with which you most strongly disagree. When doing this try to put aside consideration of the nature, strength and significance of any evidence provided in the text because this is not a direct question about that evidence: it is about relating what you have chosen to your own experience and values: what is it that makes you agree or disagree? Be prepared to explain your choices. That is where evidence will come in; evidence from your own professional life.

3. Balance and fairness

Would you say that the text is balanced and fair? You may wish to narrow this down to where you think it is and where you think it is not and simply point out some examples. I am not suggesting that you write an essay and, in any case, who says that everything has to be balanced and fair? Again, be prepared to explain what you have decided but remember that revealing to others decisions about what you consider to be balanced and fair may bring your own values not only to the surface but also into question.

4. Style

Style does matter because it is part of how we say what we want to say. It can both please and irritate. It can both highlight and hide meaning. It can both provide insight and deceive. Possibly the worst thing that a style of writing can do is to confuse the reader.

So, can you find places where the style of these texts did not help you? I guess that metaphors, analogies, examples, illustrations, punctuation and juxtapositions may provide the greatest sources of confusion and irritation. Can you identify a few places where a different form of expression might have helped? Can you provide better ones? Would the meaning change if the style of language changed? You might also like to identify places where you feel that the style helped.

5. Histories, classifications, formulations and testing of theories

It can be very interesting to trace the history of theories and to place them in appropriate groupings. Doing this can help the sense-making process. A way of thinking about theory and groups of theories is that they are relatively settled sets or expressions of understanding that can be tested. They can be based upon really thorough enquiry.

They can also be based upon very poor enquiry. Sometimes we forget that besides the field of education there are other areas of study that have used similar theories, often much earlier. Systems theory is just one example. Theories do not necessarily only grow in one field. Sometimes we refer to theory and theorists so frequently that we get involved in a spot-the-theory game, lose perspective and become unable to take a step forward.

The phrase 'cannot see the wood for the trees' comes to mind. Sometimes we use theory without realising it. The dodgy research basis for the 11-Plus examination is seldom referred to these days but the assumptions that accompanied it remain to haunt us. Can you identify and classify theories used in a text? Can you identify areas where you think that theorising is taking place before sufficient enquiry has been carried out? And can you identify areas where you think it would be appropriate to construct and carry out a test of something said in a text?

Theories are not always made explicit and a body of literature is not always identified so these might not be easy tasks. I advise managing your time carefully here. Try to remember that digging into a text to discover a hidden theory is not the desired end: the initial and main purpose of this exercise is to take part in critical conversations. Discovering, articulating, contextualising and challenging theories is part of that. But this is not a solitary activity: your conversation will allow others to express their knowledge and you may have the chance to engage in some systematic, collaborative enquiry about theory.

6. Political stance

Can you identify and classify political positions in a text? It may help to distinguish between political and party political. I take the word 'politics' to stand for the process by which people come together in order to make decisions about values and action. Political parties are supposed to have already established general sets of values from which policies emerge; although sometimes the line from value to policy may be tortuous or even broken. The general value positions of parties may also be seen as perspectives from which they examine the World. So, can you see general value

positions in a text and can you see value positions that you regard as those of particular political parties? Explaining what you believe that you have discovered is, yet again, essential.

7. Orthodoxies and assumptions

Professional life does not always encourage us to challenge orthodoxies and assumptions whether they come from politicians or theorists or have emerged from years of practice. An example of what I mean is that it has become so normal to differentiate by task that some teachers do not even know about differentiation by outcome any more.

On a larger scale you might think that society has come to accept the privatisation of education and so it is seldom challenged. Can you identify any such orthodoxies and assumptions called into question in a text? On the other hand, the text may also make assumptions and follow or propound orthodoxies; maybe without realising it.

8. Inconsistencies and contradictions

There are likely to be inconsistencies so can you identify inconsistencies within a text? In particular you may find that a point being strongly asserted in one part of a text is contradicted in another part. Sometimes authors do this deliberately in order to arrive at a synthesised or reconciled final position. But sometimes they do it because their minds are wandering. There may be advantages in following a wandering author exploring uncharted territory: it can stimulate thinking; and there may be disadvantages to reading a text that is exceedingly well designed and assembled: it can resemble a set text that has to be learned unquestioningly. You are not being asked to judge and grade the text. I merely suggest that you use any inconsistencies and contradictions that you identify in order to further your critical conversations.

9. Developed further

Is there anything in the text that you would like to have been developed further? You might also feel that you would like to research or enquire further into issues raised or points of interest in the texts. Again, be ready to explain.

