Chapter 14
Interdisciplinary Perceptions:
Academic Acculturation and a Pathway to Improved Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explicates a small-scale action research study that utilised qualitative survey data derived from academic lecturers at the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) into their perceptions of 'critical thinking'. EIBT offers pre-university pathways in the form of diploma programs identical to the first-year of a Bachelor of Business, Information Technology, or Engineering at the partner institution. Interest was in the potential consistencies/inconsistencies in understanding(s) of critical thinking among academics and the ways in which they have/are incorporating related pedagogical activit(ies) into the delivery of pathway courses to an exclusively international and non-native English speaking student population. The findings reveal that EIBT academic staff share similar definitions and insights in relation to critical thinking and are implementing many and varied techniques to enable successful acculturation of EIBT students to Western academic practices prior to them transitioning to either The University of Adelaide or the University of South Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Today's Higher Education (HE) environment is dynamic and complex, and to promote student learning in the long-term, there is evidence that academic skills need to be 'enduring'. 'Critical thinking' is one such enduring skill (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995) and a key learning outcome of most, if not all [Australian] HE institutions. Informative material students learn during their HE studies may have a relatively short shelf-life after graduation. Even if content material is not entirely forgotten, it may soon become out-dated in relation to occupational/professional fields. Albrecht and Sack (2000) emphasised the importance of skill development during [accounting] programs and stated that 'students forget what they memorise... Content knowledge becomes dated and is often not transferable… On the other hand, critical skills rarely become obsolete and are usually transferable' (p. 55).

For students to reach their potential in today's society, they must learn to think and reason critically, which has been called one of the most important attributes for success in the 21st Century (Huitt, 1998). Paul (2002) contended that 'in a world of accelerating change, intensifying complexity and increasing interdependence, critical thinking is now a requirement for economic and social survival'. Ongoing debate within HE research, however, pertains to whether students can 'learn' to think critically on their own or whether they need to be formally 'taught' this skill (Choy & Cheah, 2009). It is generally agreed that the ability to think critically is an imperative to success and research has indicated the strong need for improving critical thinking skills since many students fail to utilise sophisticated reasoning even at the HE level (Halpern, 1996; 1999; Kuhn, 1999). Learning to think critically, to analyse and synthesise information, to solve economic, political, scientific, social, and technical problems, and to work productively in groups as examples, are crucial skills for successful and fulfilling participation in a modern society (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995, p. 5).

BACKGROUND

Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT)

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) is one of a growing number of private providers partnering with universities to establish programs that create opportunities to promote Australian HE globally. The main objective of pathway providers is to attract international students early in their education lifecycle and secure their tertiary destination prior to them meeting entrance requirements (Fiocco, 2006; Velliaris & Willis, 2014). EIBT has established pre-university pathways and offers the same courses that consti-

tute the first-year of a Bachelor of (1) Business, (2) Information Technology, or (3) Engineering at the destination university; either *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*. The pathway university moderates diploma delivery and grants advanced standing for courses if students achieve an overall minimum entry-level Grade Point Average (GPA) upon graduation (Velliaris & Willis, 2014).

EIBT offers an extended period of academic preparation for entrance into HE, with specific focus on students who are 'weaker' in terms of their language proficiency and/or previous academic results (Gillett & Wray, 2006, p. 7). EIBT students represent [in alphabetical order]: Bangladesh; China [mainland, Hong Kong and Macau]; Egypt; Fiji; India; Indonesia; Iran; Kenya; Lebanon; Malaysia; Nepal; Nigeria; Oman; Pakistan; Saudi Arabia; Singapore; South Korea; Sri Lanka; Turkey; Vietnam; and Zimbabwe. With a 98% international student demographic—the remaining 2% are 'international' students with Australian Permanent Residency (PR)—EIBT lecturers face challenges that include, but are not limited to: *acculturating* international students to Australian HE; *confronting* English language-related teaching and learning barriers; and *improving* students' and overall academic performance.

This chapter was borne out of issues arising from the challenge that EIBT lecturers face in acculturating international students to Australian HE, including the development of their 'critical thinking' and associated 'problem-solving' skills. This small-scale study directly/indirectly endeavoured to address the following objectives:

- To *review* the literature on critical thinking;
- To *consider* the working definitions of critical thinking among EIBT academics; and
- To *identify* how EIBT academics attempt to embed critical thinking type activities into their course(s) considering that no standalone academic programs are offered.

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