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Contents

Transforming first-year university Politics students into critical thinkers

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the current emphasis placed by government and universities on graduate skills, in the face of considerable uncertainties about what these might involve and how they might be developed. One of the key areas of graduate skill development which tertiary students are meant to experience during their university degrees is their transformation into critical thinkers. In this context, the paper reports on the findings of a survey carried out earlier this year amongst students of first-year Politics courses, at the University of Adelaide. The survey is part of a larger project on the development of graduate skills in general and critical thinking in particular in the Discipline of Politics. The findings indicate that students understand the value and the meaning(s) of critical thinking, at least to the same degree that academics do. Indeed, first year Politics students at the University of Adelaide seem to understand critical thinking more than many or most academics might think. In addition, our findings suggest that the courses surveyed in this project are doing an effective job of transforming students within Politics into critical thinkers, at least in the view of the students themselves.

Introduction

One of the key changes tertiary students are meant to experience during their university degrees, especially in the areas of Humanities and Social Sciences, is their transformation into critical thinkers. This crucial arena of skill development is clearly articulated in the Executive Summary of the Commonwealth government's policy on Graduate Skills Assessment (Executive Summary, Graduate Skills Assessment, DEEWR). Of course, students do not necessarily enter university as unreflective individuals, but one of the key objectives of university degrees is to enhance their critical thinking skills, and produce graduates that can be truly described as critical thinkers. This skill is important to all university graduates, but arguably essential to Politics graduates.

This paper takes on that theme through a research project on the development of graduate skills and critical thinking in first-year Politics courses at the University of Adelaide. The first part of the paper explores the conceptual context within which this project arose and outlines its rationale and methodology. The second part reports on the findings of a short survey carried out in Semester 1, 2011, amongst students of first-year Politics courses. The concluding remarks revisit some of the key findings and set the scene for the next steps of the project which are intended to provide further directions for thinking about teaching critical thinking.

Conceptual Context

While over the last ten years or so, Australian universities have found themselves increasingly required to demonstrate their capacity to improve graduate outcomes and to develop teaching excellence with regard to advancing graduate skills development (Chanock et al. 2004), there remains little agreement about what this might mean (Barrie 2004). Moreover, as Barrie notes (2005), Australian universities remain rather unclear about teaching and learning strategies which might assist in producing improvements in graduate skills development in particular disciplinary/interdisciplinary content contexts. In the absence of either conceptual or teaching practice agreement, perhaps it is to be expected that a gap may be found between the literatures that might provide contributions to this area of inquiry. In this context, a large body of work exists worldwide concerning the teaching of first year students and how this may have an impact on student progression and eventually graduate outcomes (Green et al. 2006; Green et al. 2009). There is also a body of work associated with the particular disciplinary context of teaching Political Science/Political Studies/Politics in, for instance, the American Political Science Association (see for example Leaman 2005a and 2005b). However, there is little evidence of research concerning the teaching of introductions to Political Science at first year level in Australia.

Consensus regarding the crucial importance of graduate skills development at a national policy level and within the administrative management of Australian universities, as well as amongst Learning and Teaching (L/T) staff, sits at odds with this gap in research. We consider that such a gap is in part reflective of uncertainties amongst disciplinary/interdisciplinary-based academic (D/I) staff regarding the significance and meaning of graduate skills. In short, Australian universities *and* their D/I academic staff have not been clear about teaching and learning strategies regarding graduate skills. The space between national policy, management and L/T staff consensus, and the comparative lack of practical up-take by universities and their D/I staff, forms 'part of a bigger, as yet unresolved, debate about the purpose of university education' (B-HERT in James et al. 2004: 175; see also for a USA-based view of this debate, Brooks 2011: 11).

Recently all Australian universities have enthusiastically embraced the value of identifying graduate skills, and indeed have been required to do so given the growing importance of the Course Experience Questionnaire as a performance management tool by the Commonwealth government in assessing students' experience of higher education (Course Experience Questionnaire, The Role of the Australian Government, DEEWR; see also Graduate Qualities, Flinders University). For example, the University of Adelaide aims for its graduates to possess the following attributes:

- Knowledge and understanding of the content and techniques of a chosen discipline at advanced levels that are internationally recognised.
- The ability to locate, analyse, evaluate and synthesise information from a wide variety of sources in a planned and timely manner.
- An ability to apply effective, creative and innovative solutions, both independently and cooperatively, to current and future problems.
- Skills of a high order in interpersonal understanding, teamwork and communication.
- A proficiency in the appropriate use of contemporary technologies.
- A commitment to continuous learning and the capacity to maintain intellectual curiosity throughout life.
- A commitment to the highest standards of professional endeavour and the ability to take a leadership role in the community.

- An awareness of ethical, social and cultural issues within a global context and their importance in the exercise of professional skills and responsibilities (University of Adelaide, Graduate Attributes).

Such policy statements are associated with changes in the public purpose of university education in Australia away from elite higher education and towards an increasing emphasis on the generic employability of students (Marginson & Considine 2000). A growing awareness that tertiary students and study have changed has necessitated some changes in teaching to accommodate these shifts. Universities have generally interpreted this to mean adopting a 'student-centred' pedagogy loosely coupled together with one based upon the presumed requirements of employers (that is, a 'student as potential employee' centred pedagogy), rather than one framed by the requirements of disciplinary/interdisciplinary knowledges (Biggs 2003; see also Green et al. 2009).

This ongoing debate about the purpose of higher education tends to pit one particular conception of pedagogy against another one. However, this is often reconceived not as a political question of different (yet possibly intersecting) understandings of university education, but as a dispute between student-welfare oriented pedagogy, or 'process' and an insistence on 'content' which is not especially attentive to students. While it is very possible to critique such an account of the debate, this version has often been uncritically accepted. The problem here is that the re-conceptualisation of the issue of the purpose of higher education into a process/content divide in many university documents about graduate skills development has led to the construction of a professional divide. A so-called *process* focus has been generally supported by L/T staff, while a *content* focus has broadly been of considerably more importance to D/I staff. This is scarcely surprising since, although each grouping has a stake in both foci, the expertise stakes of the two groups are likely to differ— that is, the expertise of L/T staff aligns with process and that of D/I staff aligns with content.

Despite some efforts to draw L/T and D/I staff together under the rubric of co-producing new modes of teaching around the graduate skills development (Gordon & Lee 1998: 6), we suggest that most D/I academic staff remain rather cautious. The 'student as potential employee' centred approach and its evaluation through the development of calculations of supposedly neutral and typically generic 'skill development' is by no means universally accepted, given its seeming embrace of the market and utility oriented vocationalism and its associated challenge to an academic knowledge orientation (see Nussbaum 2010). In particular for the purposes of this project we venture to say that Political Science staff members have not entirely welcomed the concept of graduate skill development. This group of staff, in keeping with their discipline, are likely to see all such models of higher education as political and precisely not neutral. They are perhaps especially inclined to also see competing experts, in this case L/T staff, as expressing not simply a concern with neutral professional matters but as either implicitly or explicitly propounding particular political directions when supporting graduate skill development.

Yet, the current attention to skill development cannot be viewed as politically all of a piece. For example, it is evident from the University of Adelaide's account of graduate attributes that, in practice, a generic skills orientation may sometimes sit alongside a content specific focus on knowledges—even if the latter is somewhat crowded out. Moreover, it is also evident from this list of attributes that a knowledge orientation can intersect with at least some broad skills, with each supporting the other. In particular, certain skills can be seen as part of the way in which universities may challenge elite and established conceptions of knowledge, opening up knowledge cultures to diversity and difference, including to a diverse

population of students. Access to higher education can be seen as a means to challenge social hierarchies, engage with the wider community, and provide students with the skills necessary to ongoing learning and critical evaluation of one's society. These are possibilities which many Political Science academics are likely to find admirable.

Project Rationale and Methodology

In this context we consider that it is highly useful to undertake a project in which research on graduate skills development in a discipline-specific site is precisely undertaken by discipline-based scholars themselves. Moreover, we assert that this project is appropriately focussed around a skill that is likely to be viewed by such academics as one which is not at odds with discipline knowledges and may even enhance them. The aim is to focus upon a skill with which they are likely to concur—namely, critical thinking—since it cannot be viewed as simply reflective of an unthinking embrace of market imperatives or narrow technocratic utility. Within the University of Adelaide this broad skill is most strongly correlated with the graduate attribute which refers to 'the ability to locate, analyse, evaluate and synthesise information from a wide variety of sources'. We took this as a general operational guide to characterising how critical thinking may be understood in this particular university context, though by no means as an exclusive or comprehensive account.

In this initial stage of the project we aim to reflect on the process of enhancing skills development in relation to the four Politics first year courses offered at the University of Adelaide. Our project, in keeping with the work of Green et al. (2006, 2009), focuses on one of the skills—that is, critical thinking—because it is apposite in the context of the discipline of Political Science. Critical thinking is often not understood by students (Vandermensbrugghe 2004), many academics are rather vague about what the term means in their discipline, and evidently the term means different things within different disciplines (Moon 2008; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002; Paul et al. 1997; see also 'Research in Critical Thinking'). All the same, this component of graduate skills development is likely to be one that is broadly upheld by Political Science academics, even if it is not explicitly taught in their courses.

Our aim is initially to investigate how students understand critical thinking and how they experience the development of critical thinking in these first year courses. In other words, our attention is not located in relation towards the specific courses and their teaching processes, so much as concerned to consider if or how students understand a conception of critical thinking and how they view the first year courses in Politics in terms of such a conception. Our concern in this project is to consider student views and thus, beyond noting the broad characterisation outlined in the University of Adelaide graduate attributes, we did not presume in advance any detailed or specific definition of this conception. In the longer term we are interested in considering the results of this project with regard to graduate outcomes, the teaching of Politics more generally, and applying these results to our own teaching by further embedding critical thinking in our courses at the undergraduate level. We plan to follow up the initial study with more detailed attention to practice and reflection in a larger project that extends the longitudinal/developmental element in the pilot by returning to some students several times at different stages in their degree programs.

The first stage of this study consisted of a short survey of students in nine tutorial groups drawn from the two first year Politics courses taught in Semester 1, 2011. This paper reports and evaluates the findings of the survey with an eye to the next stage of our research.

The Survey: Questions and Findings

In order to complete the first stage of the project, we conducted a one-page survey of students in nine tutorial groups drawn from the two first year Politics courses taught in Semester 1, 2011 (five tutorials in *Introduction to Comparative Politics* and four in *Introduction to Australian Politics*). The survey consisted of four questions. The first two were of a general nature and designed to find out the most important things/skills students would like to gain from studying at University in general, and from studying Politics in particular. The other two questions focused on the understanding of critical thinking amongst the students surveyed and their thoughts on how first year Politics courses are helping them develop that particular skill. The fact that the term critical thinking appears for the first time in the middle of Question 3 was intended to minimise the chance of leading the student responses in the earlier questions.

The surveys included demographic questions about gender, postcode, and cultural and residential background. In the initial coding of the surveys we have only considered one of these dimensions, the gender dimension. This has allowed us to test whether there are any significant differences between the answers provided by male and female students. In total, 90 students completed the survey, including 50 females and 40 males. Most of the findings were more or less expected, but some were somewhat surprising and significant in terms of understanding and facilitating students' transition into University in general and into Politics in particular. We now provide a brief account of responses to the questions in the survey.

Question 1: What are the 3 most important things/skills you would like to gain from studying at University?

This question was designed to provide an unchallenging entry into the questionnaire, but also to get a sense of whether general student expectations from studying at University match up with the way the University presents itself to prospective students. This question elicited largely expected responses, but also some rather unexpected ones. Since the survey was conducted in first-year Politics courses, it is possible (perhaps probable) that the answers cannot be extrapolated to students' views in other disciplines, let alone faculties. All the same, the results are likely to be relevant for other faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Table 1

Response	Female (50)	Male (40)	Total (90)
a degree	15 (30%)	10 (25%)	25 (28%)
a job	13 (26%)	15 (38%)	28 (31%)
knowledge	21 (42%)	22 (55%)	43 (48%)
professional skills	16 (32%)*	9 (23%)*	25 (28%)*
worldly knowledge	11 (22%)	5 (13%)	16 (18%)
personal development	35 (70%)*	26 (65%)*	61 (68%)*

*some students included two or more responses in this category.

The most popular expected responses were, get a degree (25 students: 15 females and 10 males); get a job (28 students: 13 females and 15 males); and gain knowledge (43 students: 21 females and 22 males). Students also mentioned several professional skills, such as research, writing and organisational skills amongst others (25 students: 16 females and 9 males).
There were also a significant number of students who mentioned 'critical thinking skills' in the context of this question (34 students: 17 females and 17 males). This label is used here to

encompass explicit mentions of 'critical thinking' (22 students: 11 females and 11 males) and responses that are reflective of critical thinking, such as 'analytical skills', 'logical thinking', 'critical writing', the 'ability to question, analyse problems', the 'ability to analyse a political situation', the 'ability to develop arguments', and the 'ability to analyse decisions and make informed choices'. These responses indicate a predisposition amongst these Politics students towards critical thinking, and already suggest some of their understandings of the term and what it means for them. These will be noted directly and in more depth in discussion of Question 3.

Furthermore, there were two intriguing forms of response to Question 1. The first arose in relation to a distinction students drew between knowledge in general—as an unqualified thing/skill (as reported immediately above), and what might be termed 'worldly knowledge'. The latter mode of response took the form of mentioning, for example, the development of a 'deeper understanding of the world', a 'broader perception of life', as well as knowledge about 'current issues', 'other cultures' and 'the world around'. A significant number of students listed forms of 'worldly knowledge' in their answers (16 students: 11 females and 5 males). These different forms of response concerning critical thinking will be explored further in the next stage of the project.

Yet perhaps the most interesting and surprising finding arose in relation to the number of students who listed things/skills that we have termed 'personal development'. There was a wide range of responses that we included under this coding. To be sure, two of them intersect with 'professional skills', namely, communication skills and time management. However, most are clearly reflective of personal goals rather than professional development. In order of popularity, these were time-management (10 students), experience (6 students), friends (6 students), independence (5 students), communication skills (5 students), social skills (3 students), meet new people (3 students), and confidence (3 students, all females). In total, there were 61 references to 'personal development': 35 from female students and 26 from male students.

The emphasis on worldly knowledge and on personal development in the student responses contrasts somewhat with the increasing emphasis on professional skills advanced by the University of Adelaide, along with most other Australian universities. Does this reflect the value students attach to what we might call 'life-long learning'? Or is this focus upon personal development about something else? If so, should universities attend to this more directly than they presently do? It is of course possible that such responses reflect the particular orientation of Humanities and Social Sciences students. Whatever the case, such preliminary results are suggestive and certainly require closer attention.

Question 2: *What are the* ***3*** *most important things/skills you would like to gain from studying Politics?*

This question was designed to establish whether there was any significant difference between what first-year Politics students would like to gain from studying at University in general and from studying Politics in particular. Once again, this question elicited largely expected responses, but also some unanticipated ones. On the whole, the responses display a noticeable difference between students' general and specific expectations. This difference is perhaps significant in recruiting students to the study of Politics.

Table 2

Response	Female (50)	Male (40)	Total (90)
knowledge / understanding	85*	64*	149*
critical thinking skills	26	19	45
debate/presentation skills	7	4	11

some students included two or more responses in this category.

Responses to this question concentrated very heavily around the notion of 'knowledge' or 'understanding'. In total, there were 149 responses to that effect: 85 from female students and 64 from male students. Most students wrote at least two responses that fit under this general label, including 'knowledge' (13 students), 'understanding' (6 students), 'understanding politics' and 'political systems' (25 students), 'understanding the Australian political system' (15 students), a 'better understanding of current affairs' (7 students), a 'better understanding of local and foreign affairs' (7 students), and 'knowledge of other countries' (8 students).

The other significant concentration of responses to this question arose with regard to the notion of 'critical thinking'. In total, there were 45 responses which may be described under this rubric: 26 from female students and 19 from male students. The most popular responses encompassed under this label were: 'critical thinking' (16 students); analytical abilities—that is, the ability to think critically, objective analysis, etc. (11 students); and argumentation abilities—that is, the ability to develop an argument, to argue with evidence, to think through both sides of an argument, etc. (7 students).

The third most common response, but a considerably less popular one by comparison with the first two most common responses, related to 'debate/presentation skills' (11 students: 7 females and 4 males). The remaining responses mentioned 'research' (5 students), reading (2 students), a degree (2 students), and other single responses. Indeed, the significance given to 'debate/presentation skills' in response to this particular question is somewhat questionable, given that debates and presentations were activities carried out in the tutorials surveyed here. It is possible that in tutorials with no debates or presentations the references to these activities might be less prominent in the responses.

The most significant finding to emerge from Question 2 is the emphasis on knowledge and understanding that defines what students expect to gain from studying Politics, and its contrast with the wider range of expectations they have about studying at University. It is also interesting to note that there is no significant gender differential in any of the responses to Question 2. Finally, the fact that critical thinking is also prominent in their responses to this question bodes well for the overall significance of this study and provides a confirming rationale for considering responses to Questions 3 and 4. These questions focused on students' understanding and experience of critical thinking at the first-year stage of their study of Politics.

Question 3: *Politics teachers believe critical thinking is an essential skill for Politics students/ graduates. Do you agree? If yes, why? If not, why not? What does critical thinking mean to you?*

This question was designed to establish whether Politics students share with Politics teachers the view that critical thinking is an essential skill when it comes to study Politics, and thus whether they also see it as an essential skill for Politics graduates. The responses to this question are crucial, because if students happen not to share that view, considerations

of how well critical thinking skills are being developed in first-year Politics courses become rather less compelling and even open to challenge.

The second part of this question asks students to express their views of the meaning of critical thinking. Responses to this part of the question would enable us to test, albeit in this relatively limited sample, the claim that critical thinking is often not understood by students (Vandermensbrugghe 2004). We noted earlier that many academics are rather vague about what the term means in their discipline. This question regarding student views can help us determine whether the same applies to their definitions of critical thinking.

Table 3

Response	Female (50)	Male (40)	Total (90)
Yes	48 (96%)	38 (95%)	86 (96%)
No	2 (4%)	2 (5%)	4 (4%)

The survey produced the somewhat reassuring discovery that there was almost unanimous agreement with the statement that 'critical thinking in an essential skill for Politics students/ graduates'. The total number of students who answered in the affirmative was 86 (out of 90), 48 (out of 50) females, and 38 (out of 40) males. There was no gender differential in the responses, but the definitions of critical thinking were many and varied, and included the following: to analyse, reason, seek evidence (23 students); question, avoid gullibility, find truth (15 students); come to own conclusion (14 students); and to understand and think deeply and fully (10 students).

Those who replied in the negative and did not view critical thinking as essential to Politics, added the following comments: 'it means nothing to me', 'not everyone understands politics or the concept of it', 'most politicians are not great thinkers', and 'not really; you just need to know what's in the textbook'. The first response is another reflection of the lack of clarity that can be associated with the notion of critical thinking. The second response appears to equate political thinking with critical thinking, while the third makes the common mistake of confusing the studying of Politics with becoming a politician, despite the rarity of politicians who are political scientists. The final response may well be simply cynical or perhaps suggests critical thinking is not something this student has experienced so far. The extent to which critical thinking is part of the experience of studying first-year Politics at the University of Adelaide is precisely the focus of Question 4.

However, before getting into the findings from Question 4, it is worth noting two major points with regard to responses to Question 3. Firstly, it can only come as a relief, if not as cause for celebration, that the students we teach at the University of Adelaide appear to appreciate the value of critical thinking from the very first year of their degrees. Secondly, these students' definitions of critical thinking are arguably no more or less vague than those of many/most academics (Barrie 2004; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002). To the extent that vagueness and/or diversity of meanings with regard to critical thinking is deemed a problem, the starting point might be for academics to clarify what we mean by critical thinking in our disciplines, share those meanings with our students, and allow them to incorporate them into their existing understandings of critical thinking.

Question 4: *Do you think your first year Politics courses are helping you develop critical thinking skills? If not, can you explain why not? If yes, please provide specific example/s.*

The final question was designed to get a sense of how well (or not so well) first-year Politics courses are contributing to the development of students' critical thinking skills at the University of Adelaide.

Table 4

Response	Female (50)	Male (40)	Total (90)
Yes	38 (76%)	29 (73%)	67 (74%)
qualified yes	2 (4%)	5 (13%)	7 (8%)
No	8 (16%)	3 (8%)	11 (13%)
don't know / not sure	2 (4%)	1 (3%)	3 (3%)
no answer	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	2 (2%)

The aggregate responses to this question were as follows: 67 students replied 'Yes' (38 females and 29 males). That represents 74% of the student cohort with 76% of the female respondents and 73% of the male respondents responding in the affirmative. The rest of the responses were: qualified yes (7 students); don't know or not sure (3 students); no answer (2 students); and 'No' (11 students: 8 females and 3 males). The latter represent 12% of the student cohort: 16% females and 8% males. On the whole, there was no significant gender differential in the responses. Whilst the percentage of female students who answered in the negative was double that of male students, the combined No/Qualified Yes responses are almost identical (20% females and 21% males). Thus, the overall levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with how first year Politics courses are helping the students develop critical thinking skills are similar.

The reasons and examples given to justify and illustrate overall responses regarding whether Politics courses were viewed as helping students to develop critical thinking varied but some responses were much more common than others. The most common response by far made reference to 'debates' and forming arguments (24 students: 13 females and 11 males). One student noted in this setting that '[d]ebating every week or at least listening to a debate helps students to see how others approach the same problem and think about issues in different ways', while another affirmed this by drawing attention to the critical analytical aspects of this activity: 'Debating. We have to sift thru (sic) several articles and sort what is relevant and what is not'. Such comments are probably reflective of the fact that in one of the first-year courses surveyed in Semester I, *Introduction to Comparative Politics*, structured weekly debates are central to the tutorial activities. The evidence from the surveys clearly indicates that this pedagogical approach to tutorial work is seen by the students as very effective in terms of helping them develop their critical thinking skills.

The second most common response—one that can somewhat overlap with the support for structured debates—arose in relation to hearing challenging views and hearing other views than one's own (12 students: 9 females and 3 males). The gender differential here is worthy of note. It may suggest that female students are more open to having their views challenged and being exposed to the view of others, and thus more open to critical thinking. This is another issue which requires exploration in the focus groups.

The third most common response on the question of examples of developing critical thinking made reference to essays and written work (9 students: 6 females and 3 males). The most illuminating comments on this included the following: 'the essays we have been assigned encouraged us to explore different angles and points of view' and 'the tutorial papers require research, sometimes independent, from a range of sources with independent critical thinking'. The link between essays and tutorial papers and critical thinking is also encouraging, insofar as this is the most usual method of assessment in Politics courses at the University of Adelaide. However, the fact that only 10% of the respondents mentioned these written modes in relation to critical thinking suggests that more can be done to explain that link between critical thinking and essay writing to first-year Politics students. Finally, the other relatively common responses made references to course work generally (5 students) and to the methodology employed in comparative politics of 'comparing political systems' (6 students).

What is more significant is that *research* was the aspect of academic work that was not mentioned at all in Question 4. Although the lack of references to research can be somewhat explained by the several mentions of essay writing (which has a research component), this finding suggests that perhaps D/I academic teachers may need to explore more explicitly the links between research (skills) and critical thinking to students.

The responses that accompanied the qualified and negative answers to Question 4 are also significant. The most common and interesting comments made reference to the teaching of critical thinking in disciplines like Philosophy and Law as a more effective way of developing critical thinking (4 students). These comments indicate—with good reason—that critical thinking is not the exclusive domain of Politics courses, or even of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. However, it may also suggest that students undertaking courses which specifically use the terminology of critical thinking will respond positively when asked about this terminology because it has been rendered highly visible to them. Perhaps because critical thinking is a subtle and complex concept, it does not stand up well to implicit treatment? This might suggest that we should be more explicit about the meanings we attach to critical thinking in the Discipline of Politics. In any case, on the whole, the responses indicate that the activities and/or techniques employed in the courses surveyed here are working well in terms of helping students develop critical thinking skills—as they understand them.

Concluding Remarks

The preliminary findings presented here are evocative. The Politics students we surveyed (somewhat to our surprise) already value critical thinking and can see how that skill is being developed in the first-year Politics courses surveyed for this project. Such an outcome should not, however, lead to complacency. For one thing, there remains some doubt about the understandings that students and their academic teachers have regarding this skill, as well as some doubt whether these understandings are shared. The next stage of this project will enable us to elucidate this issue further, by probing more deeply into students' conceptions of critical thinking. It will also allow us to explore in more depth what areas of teaching (such as lectures, tutorials, readings) can benefit from more infusion of critical thinking and/or more explicit reference to it, to what degree gender differentials impact upon students' assessments of critical thinking in their Politics courses, and provide a space to explore what suggestions students have regarding the most effective means of and sites for developing critical thinking. The initial survey and the research that will follow will assist us further in the goal of transforming Politics students into critical thinkers, by clarifying usages of the term critical thinking and how it may be employed to enhance the learning experiences

and outcomes for students. This is by no means a peripheral concern. Indeed it is difficult to imagine a more compelling task for academic teachers in Politics.

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