Criticality

‘In higher education, the shape and nature of criticality itself is socially constructed and contextually permeated (with localized sub-field, institutional, departmental and other variations)... Our students are attempting to perform social and intellectual practices of particular fields, the rules of which they may only partially understand.’

(Johnston et al., 2011)

Introduction

Despite criticality’s status as one of the primary signifiers of successful student engagement in higher education, its actual meaning, purpose, value etc. are (appropriately enough!) the subject of much debate and disciplinary difference. Although it may be possible to speak of certain broad orientations towards knowledge and its production, the practices of being critical – not to mention the discursive practices by which students are recognised as having performed their criticality in the ‘proper’ fashion – can vary enormously between disciplines. As well as broader differences between disciplines, it is also likely that over the course of a degree programme students will encounter different definitions and practices of criticality within their discipline. Such context-specificity suggests that student criticality is best developed in similarly context-specific ways.

What we need to do

Criticality is a complex, contested and context-specific academic practice which, in turn, often serves as a proxy for a whole range of other complex and context-specific academic practices. Therefore, we need to support criticality by providing spaces and opportunities for students to rehearse what it means to engage critically within relevant disciplinary contexts. Where supporting students in transition is concerned, it is also important we gain better understandings both of how students will have encountered criticality prior to studying in HE, as well as the beliefs and expectations about criticality they bring with them to university.

Reference