End of Project report: Transitions between academic cultures: developing culture specific understandings of critical reading among higher degree students

Dr Mairin Hennebry, Moray House School of Education
Chris Doye, Institute for Academic Development
Dr Cathy Benson, English Language Teaching Centre
Jessica Laudi, MSc Language Teaching graduate student

This project was completed in the context of the MSc Language teaching, a one year Masters programme run by Moray House School of Education.

The aim of the project was:

to explore students' understandings and experiences of critical reading within a structured instructional intervention.

Project description:

Students attended 8 sessions on critical reading. The sessions adopted a framework used in systematic literature reviews as a means of structuring and scaffolding their approaches to critical reading in order to support their Masters work. The framework was applied within a theoretically sound model of instruction which entailed exploration, modelling, repeated practice and feedback.

PTAS funding allowed for systematic collating of data, including:

- Questionnaires examining understandings of critical reading before and after instruction;
- Focus groups exploring students' experiences of the instruction sessions;
- Teacher's notes on the ongoing development of students' understandings and the pedagogical considerations entailed in such instruction.

Key findings of the project were:

- Students, regardless of their cultural background, believed they had received little or no previous exposure to critical reading or related concepts.
- Students felt frustrated at the lack of clarity in feedback given on their MSc courses, mentioning phrases such as *'you demonstrate evidence of critical engagement'* or *'you need to demonstrate a greater degree of critical engagement'* as particularly unhelpful due to the vagueness surrounding the concept of *critical engagement*.
- Students expressed strongly favourable views on the framework and indicated that this allowed them to adopt a more systematic approach to critical engagement with a clearer sense of direction.
- The subject-specific nature of the instruction, delivered by a tutor in Language Teaching and engaging with subject-relevant research articles, was a key strength highlighted by

students. In our view, this throws open questions about the effectiveness of generic training and instruction on critical reading, indeed a practice also questioned in the relevant literature.

- Students particularly appreciated the modelling and repeated practice with feedback they received on the course. This was something they felt was unique on the course and was not available in any other aspect of their studies
- Even after eight sessions, the students felt they needed continued guidance and tutor support. This finding, to us, reflects the relevant literature outlining the longitudinal nature of critical reading development and questions the effectiveness of support administered in the form of one-off sessions, particularly those in the form of a lecture with no inclusion of practice or feedback.
- Students felt that critical reading was something they would engage with if time allowed but that pressures of high workload meant this was often not possible.

Benefits:

The project benefitted the students engaged with the MSc that year. It has also provided useful input to colleagues in the Language section, who are seeking to provide support for students engaging on the Language MSc Programmes. These include the MSc TESOL, the MSc Language Teaching and the MSc Education: Language. The project has played a part in shaping provision for the roughly 200 students across these programmes.

In addition, the project team is currently working on providing a self-access resource to be made available to students in future years. This is a complex process since the key features identified by students as being most helpful are not easily translated into a self-access model.

Dissemination:

The project and its findings were presented at:

- The ETAL Bag lunch
- The IAD event *'Learning from internal review: transitions'* on 26th June 2014
- The University of Oxford Applied Linguistics Seminar Series