

## Global Universities in Local Contexts: Fostering Critical Self-reflection and Citizenship at Branch Campuses

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*The struggle to bring dignity to the practice of teaching is as much a part of the activity of teaching as is the respect that the teacher should have for the identity of the student, for the student himself or herself, and his or her right to be.'*

Paulo Freire, 1998, p. 64

### 1. Introduction: Promoting Critical Citizenship in Higher Education

There seems to be a race in the global age for universities to be associated with specific attributes: university marketing literature insists on institutions being 'global', promising to educate the citizens and leaders of tomorrow thanks to key and transferable skills such as problem solving, research-based education, independent learning and the ever popular yet rarely defined 'critical thinking'. Faculties are pressed to demonstrate their progress in the internationalisation of their curriculum, and the trend is fast growing that sees western institutions opening branch campuses abroad, and developing their international network and partnerships.

The apparent commonality of aims within higher education (HE) masks vast disparities in what some of these attributes actually mean, how the relevant policies are implemented, how these skills are taught, and for what purposes. Indeed, scholarly production shows that these buzzwords are highly contested (Clifford & Montgomery, 2011). At various levels of HE practice, phrases such as global citizens and critical thinking convey profound differences regarding HE's mission and future development. Questions arise regarding the type of citizens we want to educate and indeed whether it is universities' role to educate citizens – which raises the questions of how critical thinking fits in university education. In addition, HE is evolving in both a global and local context.

These concerns take on a particular dimension in those campuses set up by (generally) UK and US universities abroad. These 'branch campuses' raise several issues regarding the institutions' footprint and reputation: they may be suspected of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism as they bring their academic and cultural norms to new contexts. Critical thinking is a typical example of such norms: who decides what constitutes 'critical thinking'? For what purposes is it taught? We propose that the assumption that it is a universal skill which could be applied everywhere, in the same manner, irrespective of local cultures may in fact hide culturally charged biases. One of our key aims in this paper is to investigate and question the relevance of, and approach to, critical thinking in contexts that are culturally, linguistically, and politically different from the home institutions that set the curriculum.

We believe that critical thinking (or, rather, as we shall explain, criticality) can serve the education of citizens in a global world and, at the same time, in their specific, local contexts. We hope to demonstrate the importance of the specific environments this education is taking place in. Critical thinking and citizenship are not abstract concepts: they are rooted in local realities and practices. They are not static either: they evolve culturally, geographically – they evolve with time and with societies. This ever-changing, multi-dimensional reality is both our students' and our own contexts.

This paper brings two distinct voices who met on one of these branch campuses: an educationalist with vast international experience in HE, including in conducting reflective writing schemes, and a historian who designed international foundation programmes in the UK (these are courses designed as alternative entry routes to UK university degrees for international students who do not have direct access). It is this international HE experience that had informed us both about the limitations of concentrating solely on language and thinking skills when helping international students adjust to new, British or Anglo-American learning environments. We also agreed on a set of educational and pedagogic principles: yes, HE is meant to educate citizens. In line with Freire (1970, 1973), we believe that students are the subjects of their learning and that their education depends on their active engagement with knowledge (as opposed to a conception of teaching where the teacher deposits a ready-made 'knowledge' in supposedly empty minds). In that same vein we also favour dialogic learning: we see teaching as a social act of engagement and interaction with other voices, rather than isolated and decontextualized vocalization (Allman 2011) – what hooks calls, aptly enough for our argument, 'critical dialogue' (hooks, 2003).

Our journey started in Kazakhstan. Our 'home' institution, which was already running successful international foundation programmes in London, was to bring them to a new international university opening in Kazakhstan. One issue we faced was that implementing an existing programme in a new environment does not lead to the same learning experience: using the very same syllabus, assessments and quality assurance overlooks the specific needs of students in a different context. Our students were far less exposed to the English language and to other educational and cultural backgrounds, and had no previous experience of having to demonstrate skills such as 'critical thinking' as defined by UK institutions. In order to effectively support our students in this complex educational transition, we designed a core module for the social sciences and humanities cohort. Its explicit purpose was to develop research skills, autonomous learning, and critical thinking.

A few years later, we were asked to use that experience to create a full postgraduate programme: like the foundation in Kazakhstan, its role was to offer an alternative route of entry into degrees, this time at masters level, and in a different country: Qatar. Needless to say, we were facing a set of entirely different needs: a much smaller cohort, older students generally with a working experience, and, in our first year, a 100% female cohort, with many of students having familial responsibilities that made working off campus particularly difficult. The level was also much higher. Students applying to masters degrees were expected to demonstrate a high level of research autonomy, critical thinking and, in some subjects, reflective practice. However, both campuses presented a set of similar challenges regarding how best to help students adjust to a new educational environment, its unspoken rules, its expectations and assumptions.

In this article, we first propose to use the term 'criticality' instead of critical thinking, as this approach contextualises the thinking and connects it back to the person doing the thinking. We develop some of our pedagogic underpinnings (Allman, 2010; Brookfield, 2005, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Mezirow, 2000) before turning to the global context of our practice and its local settings, which we attempt to theorize through Bauman's (2000, 2004) of liquid modernity. Our context of branch campuses offers a good example of the many pitfalls and challenges brought by the attempt to import home courses into different educational cultures: how do we create learning spaces that invite, accept, and validate our students voices in an academic context framed by our home institutions? This will lead to our use of reflective writing as one means to create such space, and a sample of some of the voices we heard and

learnt from. Based on our five-year experience designing and delivering courses in UK branch campuses in Kazakhstan and Qatar, this article is also a reflection on the transformative experience it has been for us as educators and citizens, and potentially for the UK institutions we return to. This journey across educational cultures offered us new challenges, and with them, the opportunity to explore new pedagogic, intercultural, citizen-based educational possibilities.

## 2. Defining Criticality to Develop a Critical Citizenship

Before exploring our own practice in Kazakhstan's and Qatar's specific, local contexts, it is important to understand where we began theoretically. In this section, we start with a critique of a certain understanding of critical thinking to propose the concept and practice of criticality instead: a subjectively-framed, contextually-based act that we find more pertinent to the fostering of critical citizens.

Many researchers use a decontextualized and universalist understanding of critical thinking (Glaser 1941; McPeck 1981; Lipman 1988; Ennis 1962, 1993, 2001; Facione, 2011). They view critical thinking as a means of solving a problem by breaking it down into its smallest parts to then understand it and solve it. It is a form of informal logic. For example, Ennis (1962) proposes a list of judgements regarding the validity of a line of thinking in order to consider how critical thinking is achieved. Never in the list is the context or identity of the thinker considered in *how* that might affect the judgments reached. It is based on an objective, universal understanding of the world that assumes personal and academic experiences have little impact on how one reasons: it is thinking for the purpose of thinking. Despite its cognitive and logical merits in terms of improving the quality of reasoning, we view it as insufficient for the education of citizens.

Instead, we propose to use the term 'criticality' so as to contextualise and reframe critical thinking to include the thinker. This draws from Barnett (1997) who defines criticality as 'taking place in three domains: critical reason, critical self-reflection, and critical action' (p. 7). In that perspective, thinkers do not only engage with the knowledge of others, but also with their own, reflecting on themselves in light of that knowledge *in order to* engage with critical action. Thinking, then, acquires a purpose and a connection to action. As Davies and Barnett (2015) summarise, criticality is a 'composite of three things: thinking, being, and acting' (pp.14-15).

Kincheloe (2008) draws from critical theory (Adorn, 1973; Horkheimer, 1974) and postmodernism (Lyotard, 1979; Spivak, 1987) when he offers a definition of knowledge creation that allows for this sense of being and acting to be incorporated into criticality. He views knowledge creation based on a critically complex epistemology. He focuses on 'critical' because it is only through the act of critical questioning that tacit assumptions can be made explicit. However, the key to this epistemology is that it focuses on complexity because contexts are highly complex. Thus, he draws attention to the fact that contexts contain an intersection of issues, based on how power is understood within those contexts. Therefore, Kincheloe writes:

Individuals who employ a critical complex epistemology in their work in the world are not isolated individuals but people who understand the nature of their socio-cultural context and their overt and their occluded relationships with others. Without such understandings of their own contextual embeddedness, individuals are not capable of understanding from where the prejudices and predispositions they bring to the act of meaning making originate. (p. 42)

In other words, criticality from this epistemological perspective requires engagement with the thinker's own context: criticality is contextually based. It is about understanding that 'phenomena exist as things-in-relationship not merely things-in-themselves' (p. 209) and students can see their understandings of the world (and those of their western lecturers – us) as 'merely one dimension of the multiple realities perceived by diverse cultures and peoples in different times and places' (p. 209).

Because we understand criticality as the thinker's critical engagement with complex contexts, the concept moves out of the objectively framed critical thinking of Ennis (1962, 1992, 2003) and becomes *subjectively* framed (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). The thinker becomes the centre of thought process and how the thinker engages the world influences that thought. Therefore, to truly engage with criticality, the thinker must move beyond an objective reality existing outside oneself into a contextualized perspective. Critical self-reflection is central in that respect, as the thinker considers 'one's own narratives of experience, economic and political systems, the work-place, feelings, interpersonal relations, and the way one learns' (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 35). Therefore, a critical global education focuses on seeing and engaging with tacit assumptions about the world and how the world works (Brookfield, 2005).

This critical self-reflection makes criticality both a continual process, never to be completed, and a transformative one. It is continual because the act of engaging with tacit assumptions and reflecting on one's own narratives is unending. There are always new contexts that a thinker enters which can cause new assumptions to come to light. And it is transformative: Mezirow (2000) writes that critical reflection is inseparable from 'focused and mindful' (p. 21) transformation. In other words, the thinker is transformed through the act of gaining awareness of one's self, of multiple understandings of the world, and of different tacit assumptions shaping those perspectives. By making visible and questioning one's own assumptions, thinkers begin to consider if they agree with those tacit assumptions – and if not, how that changes their perspectives.

This addresses the second aspect in Barnett's (1997) definition of criticality: being. The third aspect is 'acting'. Criticality is not simply thinking for the intrinsic value of thinking. Rather, it is guided by a notion of action, and action creates a need for criticality about that action. This is similar to Freire's (1970, 1973) and hooks' (1994) concept of *praxis*. Praxis is differentiated from mere thought without action, and mere action without critical thought. Rather, praxis recognizes that the two are inherently linked: thought to inform action, and action that informs thought. This notion of praxis is how we define and understand our concept of critical citizenship, which underpins our values as educators in international HE.

When we write about critical citizenship as one of the purposes of HE, we mean 'principles of participation, responsibility and activism' (Caruana, 2011). This is echoed in Oxfam's definition of global citizenship, which includes being 'outraged by social injustice... participation and contribution to the community at a range of levels from local to global... [and taking] responsibility for their actions' (cited in Clifford & Montgomery, 2011). People who engage critically, act by participation in their worlds and assume a position of mutual responsibility towards others within their worlds – by worlds, we mean a given context that can be local, national, and/or global. This is why, in this article, we chose the term 'critical citizenship' over the more common term 'global citizen' (which is the term that Oxfam and Caruana use): it is more about engagement in contexts, which may or may not be global, depending on both the thinker and the content of the thought.

Because criticality moves beyond the objective, universal (and potentially elitist) view of critical thinking into a contextualized, self-reflective and action-integrated notion that allows the thinker to see themselves in the world, and therefore act upon the world, context becomes central. And that includes ours: we aim to critically engage with our own practice in context as we attempt to engage students' with theirs. In our case, this is very much the context of international HE – more precisely, the 'exporting' of potentially western education systems (and values) into branch campuses where most of the students have different education, experiences, expectations, and values to our own. In the next section, we explore this context of an international education system in a globalising world.

### 3. Higher Education in a Globalising World

In our practice, as educators operating in British branch campuses in Kazakhstan and Qatar, our context was shaped by two predominant issues. The first revolves around a globalising world and where HE fits

within that world, and the second around the meeting of two 'layers' in that context – global and local – at branch campuses.

One of the ways in which the current era of postcolonial globalization can be understood is through Bauman's (2000, 2004) concept of liquid modernity. Liquid modernity refers to changes in 'state structures, working conditions, interstate relations, collective subjectivity, cultural production, daily life and relations between the self and the other' (Vecchi, 2004, p.5). These changes are a continual process in which traditional geographic and institutional borders of nation-states have become liquid, no longer marking a clear divide between peoples. This is an uncertain world, where, as Lissovoy (2009) states, 'globalization undermines the usefulness of political strategies organized around, or conceived in the context of, the nation state' (p. 197). With this liquefying of the nation-states' borders, migration and identities also become liquefied. For Bauman (2000), this means that 'the least answerable question of our times of liquid modernity is not 'what is to be done?' [in order to make the world better or happier], but 'who is going to do it?'"(p.133). This connects closely to our earlier consideration of HE being responsible in part for creating a critical citizenship – answering this question of who.

HE has both been affected by (as most institutions have), and attempted to respond to, this liquid modernity. Harmon (2005) shows how universities have become more diverse as academic staff move across national borders to work at a multitude of institutions. This means that universities reflect a diverse academic body coming from vastly different educational and national contexts converging together at universities, some of the most diverse being found in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Over the past twenty years, international student recruitment has also increased in universities within these three countries, indicating a change of policy towards international students: these students have now become part of universities' strategies for income generation rather than solely opportunities for assistance in development (Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005).

However, the change that liquid modernity has brought to HE that most directly influences our practice (and is the focus of the case studies in this article) has been the proliferation of branch campuses. The university in this study is hardly the only one to have invested in opening physical campuses and buildings to offer degrees in other countries. The University of Liverpool and the University of Nottingham; New York University and Texas A&M; Monash University and Curtin University of Technology; McGill University and the Vancouver Film School – these are some of the examples of British, American, Australian and Canadian universities with branch campuses across the globe. According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT, 2015), as of 13 August 2015, there were a total of 279 branch campuses located across the globe. This is a significant phenomena in the ever changing landscape of a globalising HE system, especially considering that according to the Observatory of Borderless Higher Education, there were only 24 branch campuses in 2002 (Becker, 2009).

With this rise of branch campuses comes a risk of potential elitism and creating a neo-colonial power structure within branch campuses as western perspectives and knowledge creation might be favoured over those coming from the local context. As HE institutions move abroad, a potential 'global template' (Naidoo, 2011, p. 47) seems to be created. With this template, comes the risk of a discourse of 'knowledge imperialism' and 'it is not clear to what extent the interests of developing countries [in our case, Qatar and Kazakhstan] are served by an uncritical acceptance of the prescriptions encapsulated within this discourse' (p. 50). In other words, are imported HE system and degree courses of benefit to these local contexts, and what dangers arise? As Naidoo points out, 'transnational education may begin to eliminate cultural difference and lead to erosion of indigenous values and culture' (p. 52). For us, as two practitioners engaged in branch campuses, we find ourselves asking how are we to create places of knowledge that develop criticality *inclusive* of students' backgrounds and own personal, collective, and cultural journeys? How do we avoid projecting our own assumptions and values – particularly as these are often tacit?

This brings us back to the ideas of critical self-reflection (both the students' *and* our own). Lissovoy (2009) advocates a critical pedagogy of the global that can 'reckon with the fundamental transformation of consciousness, experiences and identity that are central to the shift to the historical condition of globality' (p. 191). In other words, there is a need for openness, reflection, and consideration of how we, in that classroom, are placed within the local and global, which allows for an awareness of assumptions and transformation of understanding. This transformation comes from a places of collective and personal questioning and dialogue (as defined by Allman (2010): talking to each other rather than in turn and at each other) where we participate 'in a process of working with students through successive challenges and anxieties, as familiar frames of references are replaced, new relationships formed, and new knowledges gained... a process in which teachers are learners just as much as students are' (Lissovoy 2009, p. 194). In the next section, we explore how we attempted to do this in our courses and classrooms in Kazakhstan and Qatar, and what we experienced and discovered through those interactions into criticality.

#### **4. Fostering critical reflection in Kazakhstan and Qatar**

In both Kazakhstan and Qatar, we wanted to find means to encourage the development and expression of a critical awareness and engagement with the context of their studies. We introduced the Narrative Self Evaluation (NSE) in Kazakhstan, as an un-assessed assignment within the module we were running. This pilot was based on the assumption borrowed from Brookfield (2004, 2011) and Kincheloe (2008) that students' experiences outside of the classroom have a direct impact on who they are as learners. The NSE was meant to help students consider that impact and its evolution.

##### ***Purpose and instrument of NSE***

The NSE is an essay that is both narrative and process-based: over the course of the academic year, students reflect and critique themselves in the context of their new learning environment. Students start, at the beginning of the year, by writing a piece called 'Writing about Self', based on a series of questions. This is followed by four drafts of the NSE, each supported by a personal tutorial. The tutor is there to help students engage more deeply with the process and help them analyse and question their initial reflection further. The NSE adopts a reflective and dialogic approach: students enter into a dialogue with themselves as well as with their tutors in order to explore how they develop as learners and thinkers. The NSE asks students to reflect on four main areas:

1. How have they changed cognitively?
2. What skills have they acquired and developed on the course?
3. How does what they have learned apply elsewhere?
4. How have their values and beliefs changed throughout the course?

Thus, the NSE is meant to give students a space to develop their own voices in their own ways outside our academic demands – a space for reflection and autonomy to be investigated, explored, and expressed. But it is also a means for us, educators, to understand the transition they are going through better, and in their own voices, and thus to follow and support their development.

In Kazakhstan, our first task was to encourage our students to deepen their analysis of themselves as learners in a context greater than the limits of their classrooms. This was in support to a programme that was meant to prepare students for social sciences and humanities subjects. But it was equally relevant to their development as critical citizens: it asked them to apply analytical and reflective skills not only to subjects, but to themselves in that world they were asked to consider and study – as *their* contexts.

When we developed our programme in Qatar alongside similar educational principles, and again, in a culture very different from our institutions', we kept the NSE while increasing the importance of reflective writing in the assessment structure. This time, however, we wanted to integrate the NSE more

explicitly into the students' transition into researchers in heritage-related disciplines, and in the context of a fast-changing country.

The NSE gave us data that document a rich, and at times, difficult inter-cultural dialogue between teachers and students. We cannot in this article do justice to the whole experience, but aim to provide valuable insights in how spaces of learning respectful of students and of their contexts, can develop critical awareness and reflection, with oneself as well as with others.

In both Kazakhstan and Qatar, our purpose in using the NSE was to develop and encourage students' voices in becoming self-reflective (Mezirow, 2000), critical beings (Barnett, 1998; Davies & Barnett, 2015). As we stated above, we focused on fostering a place where students developed a rising awareness of themselves within their complex contexts (Kincheloe, 2008), and becoming aware of a collective learning focused on dialogue (hooks, 2003; Allman 2010). What we found, was that the NSE allowed for the voicing of both these ideas to come to light in completely unique ways, which raised our own awareness of the contextual complexities shaping our students' critical engagement with learning. And, while this consciousness of themselves, their own worlds, and their engagement with dialogue may have existed before an NSE was introduced into their learning, its inclusion in the curriculum allowed us, as their teachers, to see its development, while guiding us in our own transformation.

### ***Students' development***

In Kazakhstan, we noticed an evolution in the learning identity of our students over the full academic year: students departed from looking at themselves as students through the lenses of grades as a marker of learning and started to consider how learning both in and outside the classroom influenced them as beings. Specifically, students began to consider the influence of their studies on how they saw themselves.

An example of students' considering their wider contexts in 'who they are' comes from Aliya (all names have been changed). In her final NSE, she writes about her family impact on her own perspectives and choices she made. She expands on this by stating:

*It doesn't only mean their family background but also the people they hang out with, the books they read, the country, culture, religion and all that from where they come, and the education background they have as well...*

*So a lot of areas seem to overlap when shaping the person that I am.*

Here, she displays an awareness of the complexity of context, showing she might start operating from a critically complex epistemology (Kincheloe, 2008).

Dinara further develops this aspect when she considers the political, social and economic aspects of her context, realizing her rising questioning and how she could engage with her complex context:

*My study at... has changed me. Not too much, not fully, but it has changed my thoughts and the direction of their flow. It came to me firstly when I was on my way home during winter break. I met a lot of new people, and realized the difference between mine ideas and theirs. Looking at the steppe, I was thinking about my huge country, its history, its people. I was thinking about how to make a difference to it, what policies should be applied and how did it happen that Kazakhstan has recovered from its past easier than other post-Soviet countries... Everything I hear and see is followed by many questions, such as 'How? Where? When?' and of course, 'Why?'.*

Dinara not only began questioning her context and the diversity of perspectives within that context, she also began to explore the possibility of action – something central to Barnett (1998), Freire (1970, 1973) and hooks (1994) in their conception of criticality and citizenship. She began to consider her place in it and how she might begin to contribute to this context.

Another of our students, Katya actually names what she is grappling with: citizenship. She considers a research project she did for the module and what it means – critiquing the idea of a passive citizenship and realizing for herself what this entails:

*When I worked on this project, presidential elections in Russia were going on. The problems of television broadcasting, propaganda and equal distribution of media usage were of current interest. After all I have only been convinced that democracy is a system that does not tolerate passive citizenship and disinformation of the general public. Otherwise the system fails to provide basic necessities for the society and may serve other goals, rather than a well-being of the entire nation.*

Here, she begins to differentiate between active and passive citizenship, and considers the implications for democracy. Most importantly, she considers how these principles play within the regional, complex context of Kazakhstan and neighbouring Russia, informed by what was taught in her course, but using it for herself, and thinking about the role of media use locally.

A final example from Kazakhstan shows this self-reflection, but this time also the role of assumptions in critical engagement with one's contexts: Aiman reflects specifically on the very idea of assumptions:

*Assumptions could be put separately, because understanding them helps me to understand myself. For example, behind the topic of my works is personal influence. Environmental issues were investigated because I come from one of the most polluted regions of Kazakhstan. Cultural issues arise from more multicultural environment (compared to Astana) of my home city...*

She shows an awareness of her own assumptions and how they shaped her. And she has transformed her studies into a form of action, becoming interested and researching the environment in order to understand and engage with her own experiences. She is seeing a multifaceted (environmental, cultural) context of which she finds herself in the intersection. This is the very essence of our understandings of criticality for a critical citizenship.

The NSEs used in Qatar also seemed to create this space to voice a reflective questioning and transformation of the self (Mezirow, 2000). The students in Qatar, though quite different in terms of age, level of study, and context, also engaged with the process of continual reconsideration of their learning.

Asma put it most succinctly when she wrote:

*All that I can say I'm not the same person. I'm much better and stronger. I prefer this new person that [the course] help me to discover.*

She has developed a voice – a better, stronger voice that is her own. She has quite explicitly expressed a transformative educational experience.

Naeemah provides details about how she has changed in an academic environment – both in a sense of thinking critically and in how she is developing and creating her own knowledge:

*Argument stimulate my thinking because with discussions you began to build expectations about the other voice. This helps me to see to what extents I have evidence to support my position. This helps me to evaluate myself and my ideas. Now I have a different definition of learning, learning means questions and reading to find an answer, if you did not find an answer then build on your previous knowledge and create your own knowledge supported with other scholars' ideas or theories. I enjoy doing that.*

Naeemah is doing more than seeing her own voice and creating her own knowledge. She is seeing the role dialogue plays in the process. She sees a need to hear other voices. She is moving beyond her own perspective to understand that it is only one amongst many. She is demonstrating an awareness of the multitude of perspectives that Kincheloe (2008) discusses as central criticality. While she acknowledges the need to engage with other perspectives, she offers an honest assessment of that process. She states, while discussing a case study about heritage:

*It was really painful dealing with a case study your assumptions and beliefs tell it belongs only to you.*

This is very much a sign of the transformative notion of critical reflection, which Mezirow describes as 'epochal... and painful' (1985, p.25).

Although the NSE remained our best way to witness some of the dialogical learning that students began to value and engage with, it was also visible in how they engaged in classes. We first noticed this in Kazakhstan; though, because it had not necessarily been part of our intent, we cannot be sure whether it was due to that particular cohort or if it was linked to a curriculum dedicated towards dialogical learning (Allman, 2011). Specifically, we saw students take responsibility for each other, working together to ensure the entire class engaged with the research projects and even creating their own deadlines, reading drafts, and brainstorming ideas. This showed a strong sense of collective responsibility – something we value in our own definitions of critical citizenship.

In Qatar, we saw a similar phenomenon occur, and much more visibly. Several students expressed on a sense of collective responsibility in their NSEs. Asma note she was 'helpful to others' while Khadira confessed that she purposefully fought against her tendency to procrastinate so as not let her classmates down. As she was feeling and expressed a sense of responsibility to others, she also noted the value of her own self within the learning process:

*My thoughts count. I can participate in my knowledge and my learning process.*

This is at the very centre of an education focused on criticality and critical citizenship that recognizes multiple voices and invites those voices to enter into dialogue. Each student's thoughts count and they are active participants in *their* knowledge and *their* learning process.

Finally, we noted a rising confidence that led our first cohort to critique the curriculum and us, their teachers. Despite our effort to root most case studies of our syllabus within our students' Arab-Islamic context, students raised the issue of a substantive lack of Islamic voices in the reading list. And, together, as a collective, they brought this critique to our attention. Our initial response was on the defensive: it seemed to invalidate our genuine efforts to adapt a syllabus to their specific contexts. However, what the discussion raised was a lack of Islamic voice in the theory we taught them. As we were to prepare them for specific masters programme that referred to specific (western) thinkers, we found ourselves in a dilemma, but also rather out of our depth – for we did have little knowledge of, let alone expertise in, those Islamic theorists that could be relevant to our syllabus.

This realisation was not easy – and in many ways echoed Naeemah's pain at realising that the curriculum was not our own, but belonged to the students as well. The curriculum needed change. This moment of transformational pain (Mezirow, 1985) through our critical reflection of our own assumptions, made us more aware of our limitations, yet more open to critically engage with our curriculum *with* our students. We needed to step back to become the learners, and to allow our students to teach us – allowing ourselves to share the transformative nature of the learning experience (Lissovoy, 2009). We started a slow, yet important discussion regarding more diverse and relevant voices, and considered the curriculum as a shared enterprise.

The NSE was one among various means of creating space for critical self-reflection – an essential component of criticality. We wanted to make room for students to share their own understandings of themselves, to voice their own processes of engagement as part of their transformative education. Our hope was that this would allow us to see how they saw themselves becoming critical citizens, even if that was not necessarily the term they chose to use. And, by creating this space, we were indeed able to see this shift. But more than that, we began to see a shift beyond the NSE as students developed confidence to challenge our assumptions as educators. Our own need for critical reflection to influence our own actions were shaped and reformed by giving space for the potential criticality of our students.

##### **5. Conclusive remarks**

This article started with the intent to share our interest and experience in developing critical citizens in international contexts. We wanted to open up spaces for students to develop their voices – not only academically, but indeed as citizens, and to encourage them to critically engage with their complex, multi-dimensional contexts (global, local) of which we were a part as members and shapers of their new learning environments. We developed and relied on dialogic learning through various means (tutorials, NSE, as well as their academic production) and constant questioning of what students brought to our attention. Questioning them, but also ourselves, convinced as we are that critical engagement with knowledge includes an understanding of the conditions of knowledge acquisition and therefore of our own roles in the process.

We view criticality as an essential approach to educating citizens in a global age characterised by liquid modernity. This approach helps create and develop an awareness of complex realities in local, multi-dimensional contexts. Our use of self-reflection aimed to respect and support students' journeys in those (their) contexts. It was a central part in our effort to create spaces for them to be heard within academia without losing their own personal voices.

Because we aimed to hear our students' personal critical voices, this led being confronted with our own assumptions in Qatar. And, it was not the smallest challenge to be confronted with our own assumptions and biases and explore to what extent criticality can be both a universal approach to knowledge acquisition and creation, whilst being practiced in different ways in different cultures and educational settings. Yet this openness and readiness to be critiqued is crucial in the teaching and sharing of critical reflection, so that 'critical thinking' does not become the voice of the west, but rather a common principle applicable to all within global HE – including ourselves and our institutions.

We are of course conscious of the limitations of these attempts: the rigidity and strength of cultural and educational norms despite the 'liquid modernity' of a broader context impose themselves in many ways on our practice and that of our students. The development of global HE faces local opposition including by students, like those in Qatar, who, although seeking US/UK programmes, are highly sceptical and critical of the west – often perceived as arrogant in its ignorance of local realities, western-focused, and hypocritical. Breaking that frontal opposition is complex but essential in the long term: Naidoo (2011) warns against cultural dialogue being reduced to a 'west vs the rest', binary opposition. This simplifies the complex realities that criticality precisely aims to help better analyse.

In addition, the institutional, US/UK power structure remains, forcing students to conform to what we are asking them as 'the' norm. Quality assurance and institutional concerns regarding standards, particularly in campuses abroad – as understandable and necessary they may be create a considerably more rigid system than the liquid modernity we operate in requires. The very act of inviting students voices into the curriculum may raise suspicion back home: however global the institution claims to be, no university want to be perceived as caving in to students' demands (on the assumption that all that students want is to have it easier to achieve higher grades). The question of how we maintain standards in a contexts that the home institution is not familiar with remains a key challenge within global HE – particularly in branch campuses: staff abroad may grow more familiar with local contexts and find new ways to adjust to students' needs, but their colleagues back home do not.

Despite these challenges, this five-year experience will have confirmed the importance and value of criticality when considering and adapting to local, complex realities. It equipped us, we believe, with a better sense of how to work with voices in international HE environments, and how far one can go with a truly critical educational practice both in the global age and in distinctively local contexts. A criticality-focused education helps us reconsider and develop the conditions for an academic and critical dialogue (hooks, 1994; Allman, 2010) *with* the students. This means that we pay increased attention to how local contexts shape the conditions of this dialogue. The academic nature of this dialogic endeavour needs to be explicit: the notion and use of learning spaces is not an excuse to let students voice any opinions: it has to be engineered in such a way as to allow different and opposite arguments to confront each other academically, to be reviewed and strengthened as the result of debates, and peer work, and to make knowledge a collaborative endeavour. This is in itself, within academia, an act of critical citizenship.

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