

# ual:

## Making Visible the Invisible: Criticality in Student Academic Writing

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# Outline

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- Context
  - UAL < London College of Fashion
- Academic Literacies
- Criticality
- Methodology
- Findings
- Materials
- Implications



# Context - UAL

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- Central Saint Martins
- London College of Communication
- Chelsea College of Art
- Camberwell College of Art
- Wimbledon College of Art
- **London College of Fashion**
  - Design
  - Business
  - Science



# Academic literacies

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‘...a critical approach to researching and teaching writing and literacy...’ and how these impact on ‘individual meaning making and academic knowledge construction in higher education’ (Mitchell, *et al.*, 2015, p. 4)

‘How to make language and writing visible in meaningful ways in disciplinary activity’ (Lillis, *et al.*, 2015, p. 4)

- Academic writing from perspective of student writers
- Students may be unaware of practices of institution/discipline/genre/assessment types
- Students asked to be critical (learning outcomes) but this can be abstract/fluid

# Learning outcomes: criticality

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- **Critically evaluate** theories and research involving...
- **Critically reflect** on your contribution to...
- **Critically analyse** the roles of...
- **Critically evaluate** the outcomes of...

# Aims/research questions

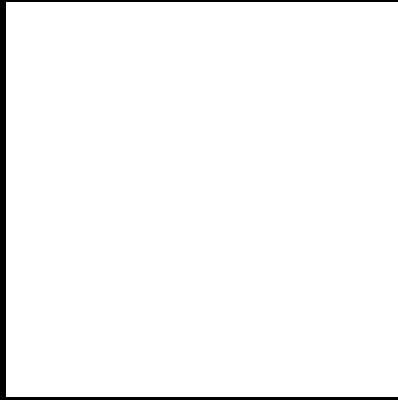
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## Aims

- To discover more about teachers'/students' understanding of academic writing practices;
- To discover what the construct of criticality may look like for a group of students and their discipline teachers;
- To investigate the linguistic/literacy skills students need to become more critical in their writing.

## Research Questions

- How do teachers describe the construct of criticality?
- How do students describe the construct of criticality?
- What implications are there for pedagogy?



# Methodology



# Participants

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Participants	Role	L1	Other Information
Maria	Teacher	Latvian	Taught since 2015
David	Student	Spanish	Fashion designer
Rosa	Student	English	Photographer
Fang	Student	Mandarin	Studied fashion design
Zhang	Student	Mandarin	Studied fashion design
Emily	Student	Ukrainian	Studied journalism
Alicia	Student	Italian	Studied journalism



# Methodology: process

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## Data Collection

- Used course documents (briefs/handbooks)
- Asked general questions to students/teachers about writing
  - Semi-structured interviews
- Asked questions about specific assignment
  - Stimulated recall (Gass & Mackey, 2015)
- Audio-recorded/transcribed

## Data Analysis

- Highlighted areas connected to criticality
- Formed categories/sub-categories

# Semi-structured interviews

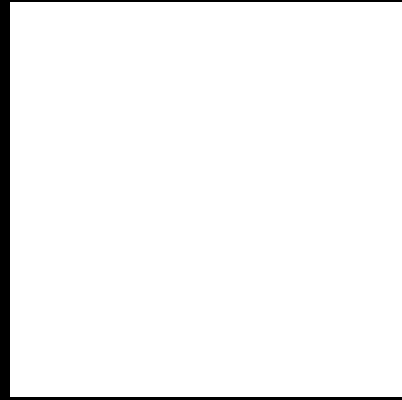
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- What kind of issues do you/students have when writing academic work?
- What things do you/they do well?
- What things do you/they not do so well?
- Why do you think this might be so?
- What things have you previously done to mitigate some of these issues?
- What issues are there with criticality?
- What changes would you make if you were to do the assignment again?

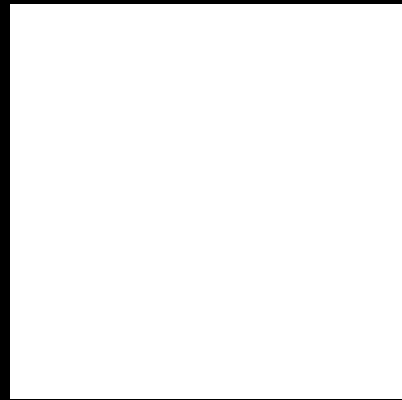
# Stimulated recall: questions

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- What was the most challenging aspect of this particular writing?
- Explain why/how sources were used?
- Can you show me an example in the writing where there was 'criticality'?
- Is there a position in this writing?
- What did you want to do/say with this part?
- How successful do you think you were?
- How might the writing be changed?



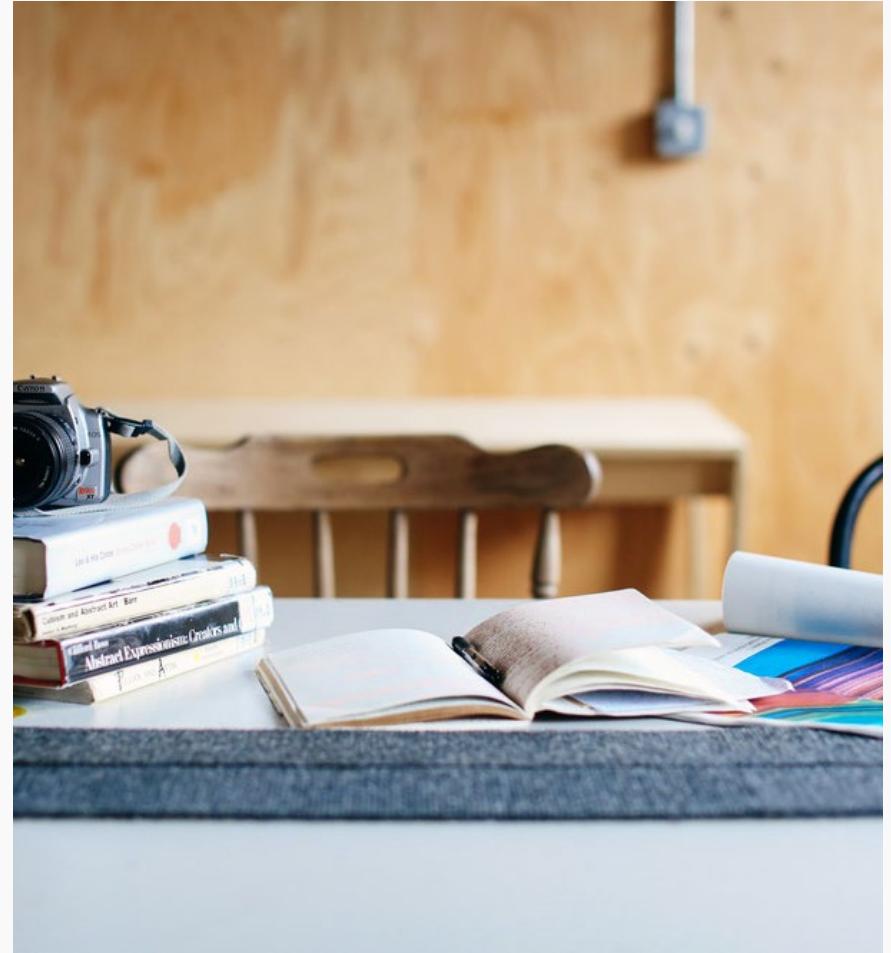
# Findings



# Criticality

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“But if somebody could just point..., ‘Oh here... you don’t have this critical thinking’ but I can’t really understand it on my own” (Emily)



# Findings: general

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- Some good examples of criticality but students often:
  - Lack understanding of criticality
  - Fail to challenge knowledge
  - Overly descriptive/lack of supporting evidence
  - Lack of discipline knowledge

# Lack understanding: teacher

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- So, it's almost like sometimes they **criticise**...(work) but their **criticism** is irrelevant to the theory (when) applied in certain settings
- They **criticise**, kind of hit and miss; some of them think they just need to criticise anything, it doesn't matter what
- ...when they **criticise** they forget to acknowledge the strength of the work. So, it's almost like they **go critical**, they keep going and say how bad it is.
- The main thing why they do it is because they **don't read enough** (it) prevents them [from] comparing if they can't compare they can't **critically evaluate**.
- Sometimes it's difficult because there are cultural things that you are working with where **criticality** is not something that is ... a skill to be applied.

# Lack understanding: students

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- I would basically include more **critical thinking**. That's the thing I need to discuss more with the teacher because I don't really understand...**critical thinking** is something that you can't really understand. You can't really just put more of it, like, in your dish or something; saying you kind of need to maybe know more about the whole topic. But if somebody could just point me, 'Oh here you don't have this **critical thinking**' but I can't really understand it on my own. **(Emily)**



# Unchallenged knowledge: teacher

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- They can't **easily question ideas** of other academics considering that they are students
- They use loads of quotes to present... 'praise' for what another person said... I want them **to take that work and pull it apart** and tell me what are the **strengths**, what are the **weaknesses** – everyone has their weaknesses but they are a bit shy of that

# Unchallenged knowledge: students

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- it's really difficult, especially because of the different country mentality... when we are citing we could **never critically evaluate** professors' work – it just, you know, for us the professor is somebody who knows everything and he [she] does everything correctly (**Emily**)
- ...so Piaget says this so this is what it must be (**Alicia**)

# Overly descriptive/lack supporting evidence

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- They can **assess** very surface issues, something that kind of jumps out but they are not very good at going and looking at the whole idea, the coherent piece...is there a thought? Is there depth of knowledge? Is there breadth of knowledge? **(Maria)**
- ... by the end of my tutorial I was laughing with embarrassment because every line was an opinion and I just can hear the teacher's words saying 'prove it'; 'how?'; 'who said it'; 'what?' 'why?' **(Rosa)**
- However, sometimes I feel that I **don't have enough judgement** to know if that deduction is valid enough to be made on its own or if it requires me to look into a deeper source to support this deduction **(David)**

# Discipline knowledge: teachers

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- But critical thinking, **unless they come from [a subject] background**, this is the part they struggle with the most...
- My cohort will have a lot of students who come from other disciplines...so their writing is really good and they can write in a captivating way, they've got good background Bachelor's degrees... however, they **can't really read [subject]...write [in a subject way]**; they don't understand how to **form an argument**.
- So the **argument** is positioned in the wrong way... for [this] writing you need **to evaluate evidence** and then come to the conclusion based on your evaluation. But she comes to the conclusion and then starts to give you the evaluation

# Summary

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- Abstract, fluid, context-dependent
- Unsure about the term/construct
  - Criticise, Critique, Criticise
- Unaware what to do with knowledge
  - How: praise/question/challenge/evaluate
  - What: methodologies, methods, writers, sources, knowledge, ideas, strengths and weaknesses
  - choose/compare/contrast/synthesise/(dis)agree/align/identify

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**Thank you**