Language and Learning Services (Arts)

What makes a good critical review?

Read the topic and sample review. Then study the comments on the side. (A copy of the original article – by Ballard & Clanchy – available on request)

Topic
Write a critical review of Chapter 2 of Study abroad: A Manual for Asian Students. In your review you should summarise the chapter and then evaluate it. (1,000 words)

Sample review

1. In recent years, it has become a common trend for overseas students to travel to Australia to undertake university courses. Whilst most of these students are very successful in their degrees (Hawthorne, 2000), some do experience difficulty along the way. Students find inevitably that doing all their study in English poses a significant challenge. Others find that the ways of studying can be different from what they are used to in their home educational culture.

2. Differences in educational cultures are the subject of Chapter 2 of Ballard and Clanchy’s book Study abroad: A Manual for Asian Students. In particular, the authors explore the question of whether students from different cultures think differently. Whilst they admit that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions here, they do think that overseas students in Australian universities “often bring different purposes to their thinking and learning” (p.9). By this, they mean that students can approach academic tasks in a manner that is different from that expected by their lecturers.

3. To support this idea, the authors present a number of case studies, in particular a Japanese student’s response to the following essay. This student’s essay consisted of explanations and examples – “moving directly from the central idea to evidence” (p.4). According to the authors, these types of activities are typical of high school education in Australia. The second approach is an “analytical” one and is thought to be typical of Australian tertiary education. At this level students are expected “to question and think critically about knowledge” (p.11). Finally at post-graduate level, students are required to do independent research and be original in their approach to knowledge. This is described as a “speculative” approach. The authors believe that education systems in Asian countries tend to emphasise the first of these approaches i.e. “reproduction”. Therefore, when Asian students study in Australia they generally need to adjust their approach and learn to be more critical and analytical. The problems in the economics essay quoted above can therefore be explained in terms of the student’s failure to adjust his approach.

4. In explaining this mismatch of approaches, Ballard and Clanchy propose that there are three fundamentally different learning styles. The first of these is a “reproductive” approach. This involves students learning “by memorizing information, solving problems and following procedures set by the teacher” (p.11). According to the authors, these types of activities are typical of high school education in Australia. The second approach is an “analytical” one and is thought to be typical of Australian tertiary education. At this level students are expected “to question and think critically about knowledge” (p.11). Finally at post-graduate level, students are required to do independent research and be original in their approach to knowledge. This is described as a “speculative” approach. The authors believe that education systems in Asian countries tend to emphasise the first of these approaches i.e. “reproduction”. Therefore, when Asian students study in Australia they generally need to adjust their approach and learn to be more critical and analytical. The problems in the economics essay quoted above can therefore be explained in terms of the student’s failure to adjust his approach.

5. To reinforce their views that these cultural differences in thinking exist, the authors refer to the work of Robert Kaplan. Kaplan argues that there are five distinct patterns for structuring an expository paragraph. Of particular interest here is the contrast he establishes between the English pattern, which he calls “linear” – “moving directly from the central idea to explanations and examples” - and the Oriental pattern, described as an “approach by indirect” – “sentences moving round the topic and avoiding any explicit judgement or conclusion” (p.15)

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Ballard and Clanchy therefore suggest that students intending to study in English-speaking countries need to do more than develop their English language competence. They also need to adapt their study behaviour and in particular “to develop a more analytical and critical approach to learning” (p.17).

How convincing though, is this idea that Asian students think in a fundamentally different way? First of all we need to consider the evidence Ballard and Clanchy draw on to support this view. The case studies presented seem persuasive, but it must be remembered that these are only small in number and we do not know how typical they are. Are students thinking that Japanese student for example, may be quite unusual. In my view, more systematic and comprehensive research of this issue is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. It would be interesting for example to try the essay topic on a large group of students and test how they would respond to it. The authors of the chapter can therefore be criticized here for a lack of evidence to support this view.

Another questionable aspect of this article is its implied cultural bias. Although the authors do not state that the methods of Australian education are superior, this is what is implied from their model of learning styles. Whereas it is suggested that Australian students progress from a “reproductive” approach to an “analytical” approach, the authors seem to think that Asian education does not move beyond this “reproductive” stage. Are Asian tertiary students then to consider themselves only as the equals of Australian secondary students? By implication, Asian education is seen as an undeveloped form.

This same cultural bias can also be found in the Kaplan material. His characterisation of the English pattern as “linear” in contrast to the “circularity” of the Asian pattern implies that he finds the former more logical. Scholars from Asian countries, which have their own rich traditions of learning, will notice that the remainder of the text has identifies in the text – but this of course is only one person’s impression. (Note that being ‘critical’ in the university context does not necessarily mean being ‘negative’).

The student has been critical of the text on the basis of a number of criteria in.
- limited evidence to support main argument (par 7)
- cultural bias in main argument - and that of Kaplan (par 8-9)
- oversimplification in Kaplan model (par 9)
- lack of logic in implications of main argument (par 10)

Hint: It is important for you to develop a sense of the criteria that you can draw on in evaluating texts in your field. Those above are just a few.

Despite these criticisms, Ballard and Clanchy’s article still has some value and we need to judge it in terms of the authors’ purpose in writing it. It is not intended to be a rigorous piece of academic work, but is intended mainly to assist students in preparing for overseas study. We can therefore understand why the authors choose to be positive about Asian students’ capacity for adjustment, and why most cases are presented ultimately as success stories. The issue of how cultural differences affect academic performance nevertheless, remains a complex one, and further research is no doubt required before we can gain a full understanding of it.

References