

It's The Curriculum, Stupid!

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Abstract

In this paper we, firstly, explore the importance and positioning of 'thinking skills' within the Further Education (FE) curriculum in hard times - for society generally and education in particular. Secondly, we argue that 'thinking skills' have been lost from the curriculum over recent years and are now in urgent need of rehabilitation; not as a bolt-on, but at the heart of the curriculum. We then invite readers to consider the Learning and Skills Improvement Service's (LSIS) endorsed framework for 'Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural' education as a powerful means of re-embedding 'thinking' within the vocational curriculum in support of both the 'skills' and the 'social cohesion' agendas. Finally, we consider the implications of this for the development of vocational pedagogy and for teacher education.

Key words

Thinking Skills; Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC); Curriculum Design; Teacher Education.

Introduction

We need to teach learners to think critically about themselves, their work and their relationships with others and with society. If learners are leaving education ill-prepared for life and work, can we blame them? Well, they would surely respond, "of course not, it's the curriculum..."

A much quoted proverb states:

*"Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day. **Teach someone to fish and you feed them for a lifetime.**"*

Sadly, we believe that there is no longer a guarantee of this. Metaphorically speaking, the lake is drying up and the fish stocks are declining. A more valid proverb for hard times might be:

*"Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach someone to fish and you feed them **for as long as the fish are plentiful. Teach someone how to think and solve problems whilst you teach them to fish and they have a far better chance of adaptation and survival.**"*

The overarching concern, expressed in this paper, is that the curriculum has become too narrowly focused on vocationally-specific outcomes at the expense of preparing learners to think critically, widely and deeply as they prepare for difficult times ahead in work and life. The question we pose is not new; it has been rattling around for years now. It comes back to "what is the purpose of the vocational education and training system?" Are we in the business of turning out (for example):

1. qualified bricklayers?
2. qualified bricklayers who are also good thinkers?
3. good thinkers who are also qualified to lay bricks?

This question gives rise to the following corollaries:

- A. 'do we actually expect bricklayers to be good thinkers, at all?' (*Of course we do, don't we?*) and
 B. 'aren't we teaching them to "think", already?' (*Of course we are, aren't we?*)

It is tempting to ask whether these questions would have the same impact if the context were a less stereotypically vocational discipline such as accountancy or civil engineering.

These questions represent three very different 'senses of purpose' which influence not only the way the curriculum is delivered within the classroom, workshop or workplace but also the whole institutional ethos and curriculum offer. Question 1 points to an all too prevalent ethos and practice which, at best, corresponds to 'satisfactory' in Ofsted's terms. Question 2 points to an aspiration which prescribes what 'good' or 'outstanding' provision should look like. Question 3 is an altogether different entity and is aimed more at national policy makers who, despite the plethora of reviews of Further Education over the last ten years or so, still seem unable to clarify what the clear, unambiguous purpose of the system is or agree as to its potential value socially and economically.

Thinking Skills And The Role Of The FE System

Whilst we might not all agree about a single purpose of the FE system, there is general agreement about three broad aims which may be present in any one provider institution to varying degrees. These are: (a) the achievement of skills; (b) support for social inclusion/cohesion; and (c) academic achievement and personal development. As an illustration, Table 1, below, offers two very similar perspectives separated by a period of nearly a decade.

Table 1: The role and purpose of the FE system

	<i>Mansfield and Mitchell (1996) The role and purpose of the systems and processes of education are to:</i>	<i>Foster (2005) groups the FE sector under three, sometimes overlapping, main purposes:</i>
1.	prepare people for independent economic activity – we may call this the instrumental purpose, a means to an end	<i>building vocational skills</i> – providing a range of courses and qualifications to prepare learners for employment and upskilling those in the workforce
2.	empower people to play a full part as citizens in a democratic society – this purpose is to do with access, choice and equality of opportunity	<i>promoting social inclusion and advancement</i> – delivering courses that meet learners' personal aspirations or promote social integration
3.	enable every person to develop their natural talents and capabilities to the fullest extent – this purpose is to do with individual progression, improvement and self-fulfilment	<i>achieving academic progress</i> – including GCSE and A-Level work, often 'second chance' and providing vocational, as well as academic, pathways to HE

The Nuffield Review of 14-19 education (2009) echoes this view of the three roles of the FE system and calls for, as the first of five 'over-arching demands':

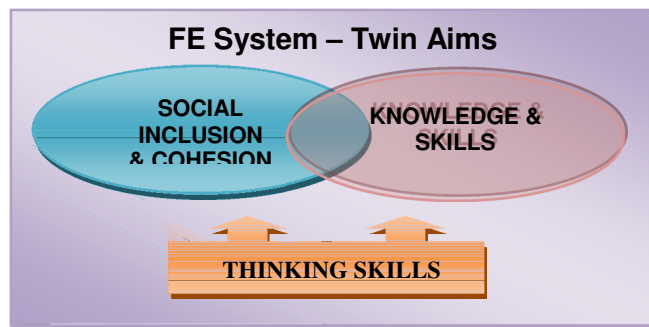
'The re-assertion of a broader vision of education in which there is a profound respect for the whole person (not just the narrowly conceived "intellectual excellence" or "skills for economic prosperity"), irrespective of ability or cultural and social background, in which there is a broader vision

of learning and in which the learning contributes to a more just and cohesive society'.

(p. 4)

For the purposes of this paper, we simplify this tripartite role classification of Table 1 to a dual model of a combined knowledge and skills agenda on the one hand, and a social inclusion or community cohesion agenda on the other. In other words, the twin aims of preparing learners to make an effective contribution to work and to society (and work is, of course, a significant component of society).

Figure 1: Thinking skills and the role of the FE system



Our argument here is simple: **the ability to think critically and to therefore make reliable judgements based on valid information and reasoning is the fundamental building block of both sides of this dichotomy.**

It is not our thesis that 'effective thinking' is the only important skill to underpin fulfilment of these twin aims of FE, but rather that this skill is fundamental to higher order effectiveness as a (lifelong) learner within the context of the individual's engagement with work and society (with the former being simply a more prescribed example of the latter). By way of relative weighting of importance, it is our contention that effective thinking is on a par with literacy, language, numeracy and ICT skills in its essential contribution to overall personal effectiveness.

Thinking – What Do We Think This Means?

We should, of course, define what we mean by the term 'thinking skill' or 'effective thinking', but this poses a problem because there is no single definition or, indeed, a consensus view. We contend that it is 'conceptually fuzzy'. However, categorising thinking by labelling it does little to help us understand what it means. Consider just a few commonly used descriptive tags: critical; lateral; reflective; logical; evaluative; analytical; emotional; creative; abstract; strategic; holistic; objective; subjective and so on.

If we consider the first, and possibly most favoured label in this context, *critical thinking*, anyone who has tried to 'nail this particular jelly to the wall' will have discovered that there are few definitions that remotely approach a consensus in the psychological and philosophical literature (see, for example: Lai, 2011; Brunt, 2005). However, in a review for the Higher Education Academy, Moon (2005) provides a conceptually simple and intuitive view of how effective (critical) thinkers are able to evaluate issues and ideas from different viewpoints (*relativistic*) rather than from a dogmatic, black-or-white position (*absolute*).

Good judgements, according to Moon, will reflect relevant context; they will be evidence-based, but that evidence will be understood as relative to circumstances and contexts. This model of (critical) thinking can usefully explain other related 'thinking concepts' and, tantalisingly, appears to be the 'mother of them all'.

Consider, for example:

- *evaluating*: because a tool/strategy/article of clothing /etc is useful in one context, we understand that it does not follow that it is useful in all contexts (absolutely!)

- *making judgements*: because a behaviour is 'wrong' in one situation does not mean that it will (absolutely) be wrong in all circumstances
- *understanding*: I might only have ever seen white swans, but that doesn't prove that all swans are white
- *attributions (a)*: just because Bill ignored me today, it doesn't necessarily mean he is antisocial, by nature,, he might just have had a bad morning
- *attributions (b)*: feeling sick in the morning isn't necessarily a symptom of excess alcohol from the night before.

Moon gives a very practical approach to understanding how skilful thinking underpins the ability to make defensible, context-relevant, evidence-based judgements. Effective evaluation, problem solving and valid understanding, whether in skills-related or social situations, can be more clearly seen to flow from Moon's definition of critical thinking. Consider, for example:

- the ability to work with relative autonomy and to assume responsibility in work situations
- the confidence and independence of mind necessary to resist radicalisation, whether by fundamentalist plotters or by the European Defence League.

In both these examples, an understanding of the relativity of evidence or information set within a given context coupled with a reluctance to cling to absolutes is likely to lead to more appropriate and effective behaviours.

There are, of course, other definitions (or perhaps, merely, classifications of thinking skills). For example, Greatbatch and Lewis (2007) describe thinking skills, in their review of generic employability skills, as:

- managing information
- problem solving
- planning and organising skills
- learning skills
- thinking innovatively and creatively
- reflective skills.

This categorisation, which is very typical, does not define or explain thinking, per se, but rather the purposes to which it is put. More importantly, each of these purposes relies on, to a significant or considerable extent, critical thinking as described by Moon. Likewise, a more mainstream approach to defining generic, employability skills can be found in the 'recipe' for National Curriculum (Key Stages 3 and 4), the Apprenticeship framework and 14-19 Diplomas. These are Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills which comprise six skill groupings which the (erstwhile) Qualifications and Curriculum Authority claimed (QCA, 2008) stand alongside the functional skills of English, mathematics and ICT, in underpinning 'success in learning, life and work' (this claim parallels similar assertions made, above, in this paper). The six groups of skills are:

- independent enquiry
- creative thinking
- reflective learning
- team working
- self-management
- effective participation

A more historical example, for those who can remember, were the four grading themes used to evaluate students' work in the early days of GNVQ implementation - *planning, information seeking and handling, evaluation and quality of outcomes* (OCR, 2000; p7). All of these different 'takes' on a similar concept serve to both reassure us that there is a 'valid something' to talk about and also confuse us through a seemingly endless array of arbitrary classifications. However, again, it is hard to imagine how these higher order abilities, however defined, could be demonstrated without the capacity to think critically based on a clear understanding of the relativity of information in a given context.

We argue, therefore, that the ability to think effectively – to think 'critically', as defined by Moon (2005) – underpins most, if not all, other classifications of thinking skills and, further, is as equally important as personal skills in literacy, language, numeracy, information and communication technologies as a foundation for future success in work and society. For this reason, we believe it should be placed securely at the heart of the curriculum and not as a bolt-on (or 'also-ran'). Hence, the question, 'do we want qualified bricklayers¹ who are also good thinkers?' or, 'good thinkers who are also qualified to lay bricks?'

Thinking Skills – Don't We Teach This?

The answer to this question is probably both 'yes' and 'no'. Certainly, in their response to the Wolfe Review of the Vocational Curriculum, the AoC (2010, Section 44) state their belief that:

'College programmes for young people already deliver, and should continue to provide, a baseline of general and transferable skills. (By "transferable skills we mean, for example, skills such as problem solving, working within a group to achieve a common aim, learners understanding their own role in society.)'

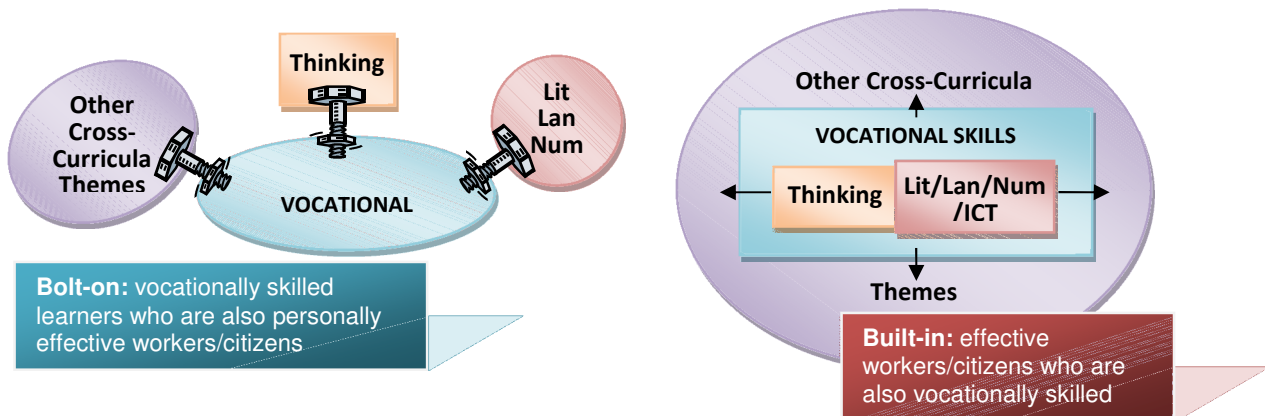
(p. 17)

What is true in principle is not, however, always true in practice. Some vocational teachers can be quite resistant to the idea that they should also be responsible for anything other than delivering their vocational subject. Consider, for example, the difficulties experienced in engendering a truly embedded approach to literacy, language and numeracy skills development (Casey et al, 2006). The idea that a vocational teacher should automatically be able to, or indeed want to, teach transferable skills from within their vocational specialism, without considerable support and inducements, is naïve. This is, of course, not to say that such teachers don't exist – and we need research on this – but they are unevenly distributed (and many, we would suggest, teach in pre-vocational contexts).

Further, thinking skills, if taught at all, are likely to be 'covered' as a curriculum bolt-on rather than designed into the curriculum at its very core and embedded within 'everyday' vocational pedagogy. Having stated this, the authors would accept that 'bolted-on' is better than 'fallen off'.

¹ Or accountants/civil engineers, etc.

Figure 2: Curriculum design



One of the authors of this paper remembers how during the 1970s and 1980s many vocational courses required a range of more general education themes to be addressed through the provision of Liberal Studies. In some cases, Liberal Studies were taught in isolation to the main vocational programme but this bolt-on approach sometimes led to antagonism between the staff involved and the devaluation of the broader element of the programme. This form of provision achieved its best results where the general education and the vocational staff planned their work together. This more integrative approach was greatly enabled on the Business Education Council (BEC) courses after its establishment in 1978.

BEC's philosophy was that it would provide the overall course aims, objectives and structure whilst colleges would develop meaningful learning opportunities to deliver the programme to their students. Most interestingly, the BEC cross-modular assignments provided an inbuilt opportunity for integrating the vocational content of the whole study programme with the common skills. In the days before the Excellence Gateway, staff had to rely on local and informal arrangements for exchanging ideas and published material. The staff (including the aforementioned author) in the Business Studies Department at one college took this as an opportunity to get their ideas published, drawing them together and presenting them in the form of a students' book of assignments with an accompanying lecturers' resource manual. This approach sought to develop a wide range of thinking skills, including moral judgement on issues relating to students' day-to-day work experience. The lecturers' manual explained the theoretical background to the material and provided the necessary back-up material required to complete the assignments set out in the students' book (Commons et al, 1983).

Back to 2011, and sadly this type of example of embedding thinking skills at the heart of the vocational curriculum does not appear to be high on the agenda of either vocational or academic teachers. Whilst thinking skills can be applied to solve naturally occurring problems in the context of both technical and academic programmes of learning they are also needed when wrestling with wider issues such as those concerned with personal, interpersonal and social development. At a time when the sector is expected to work with increasingly disaffected learners facing an uncertain or seemingly hopeless future the argument for embedding such issues into the mainstream curriculum is even stronger. Further, we do have an appropriate vehicle for embedding critical thinking and developing this more socially responsive aspect of curriculum design; it is the LSIS endorsed initiative to integrate Spiritual,

Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) education within the curriculum. The requirement to embed SMSC will be made more explicit, below, but for now, let it suffice to say that it is our belief that it offers our best opportunity for making thinking skills a central plank of FE provision.

Spiritual, Moral, Social And Cultural Education As A Relevant, Important And Effective Means Of Developing Critical Thinking

Put most simply, SMSC² education develops young people to better understand themselves, others and the social and cultural context of contemporary society. Consequently, they are better able to develop appropriate responses and behaviours. The Religious Education Non-Statutory Guidance (QCA, 2004: p. 13) described it as helping young people to develop these characteristics, so that they are able, for example, to:

- feel confident about their own beliefs and identity and develop a positive sense of their own spiritual, moral and social ideas
- recognise their individual uniqueness as human beings
- recognise their own bias and prejudice
- engage in argument with respect and develop a willingness to listen and learn from those whose views are different from their own
- critically evaluate difference and diversity for the common good
- distinguish between opinions, viewpoints and beliefs.

This prescription is immediately and obviously appropriate medicine for starting to address some of the current ills of social exclusion and lack of community cohesion. It also offers a very suitable tonic for the development of the critical thinking skills which learners will need for academic and/or vocational success. Each of the outcomes of SMSC, described above, can only be achieved by *relativistic* critical thinking and the avoidance of *absolutes*, in Moon's (2005) terms. SMSC also gives us the clear steer that we need to embed thinking skills within the vocational curriculum. Ask yourselves, 'what areas of the vocational world (education, training or work) are devoid of social, moral or cultural aspects, operational interactions or consequence?' Further, ask yourselves, 'is the spiritual aspect relevant?'

The spiritual aspects of SMSC are perhaps most likely to jar with a predominantly secular education service. No one should, however, feel uncomfortable with this - because *spiritual* incorporates all faiths **and none**, and does not automatically imply *religious*. *Spiritual*, in this context, is about the development of the inner life and of knowledge and understanding of self, relationships with others and the world around us. It can be an exploration of meaning and beliefs and it can point directly towards what West-Burnham (2005: p. 35) calls 'deep' and 'profound learning'. It also promotes an awareness of others' religious or non-religious beliefs, which is surely important given that we teach, learn and live in a multi-cultural society.

Table 2: A summary of each of the four areas of SMSC development (adapted from LSIS, 2010)

Moral Development	(Exploring and understanding shared values and the ethical frameworks that underpin them.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues of moral value, right and wrong • Concepts such as justice, honesty and truth
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² Readers wishing to research SMSC a little deeper should refer to the LSIS (2010) SMSC Report.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding sources of moral thinking, both religious and non-religious • The influences of family, friends and the media on moral choices
Social Development	<p>(Understanding the functioning of society and political institutions to support participation and empowerment within the community.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and personal qualities for living and working in a diverse society • Understanding the influence of religious and non-religious beliefs on relationships, institutions, and society • Inter-personal skills for successful relationships • Opportunities for participation and volunteering • Key concepts: democracy, human rights, equality, tolerance, rights, responsibilities
Spiritual Development	<p>(Awareness of inner life: belief, values and meaning.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights into personal experience • Reflection and the attribution of meaning to experience • Valuing a non-material dimension to life • Purpose, fulfilment and direction in life • Awareness of others' beliefs
Cultural Development	<p>(Understanding one's own and other cultures, and developing the ability to operate in different contemporary cultural settings.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of own and others' culture • Valuing cultural diversity • Understanding cultural, religious and non-religious traditions and their evolution • Opportunities for art and performance to build self-confidence and identity

Breaking down SMSC in this way is rather artificial because there is considerable overlap between the elements. For example, building self-confidence and identity could be said to contribute to both spiritual and cultural awareness. Social and cultural development overlap considerably with elements of post-16 citizenship and there are clear links here to preparing young people for their future roles as citizens and employees. Wright (1989) asserts:

'Employers often emphasise the importance of moral competence in their job specifications by stressing such qualities as loyalty and reliability. An education which focuses on the development of skills and knowledge but which does not address the issue of the moral values which determine the use to which such knowledge and skill is put is manifestly inadequate as a preparation for living and working'.

(p. 9)

However, we should be aware that addressing these issues will at times mean encountering challenging differences, as well as shared values, in the moral stances derived from different religious and non-religious views of the world.

The integration of SMSC within the FE curriculum has other notable benefits due to its close links with many other current, significant initiatives and programmes within the learning and skills sector including:

- the obligation on colleges to work with and consult local stakeholders, including faith communities
- the requirement to contribute to community cohesion
- the delivery of post-16 citizenship
- guns, gangs and knives
- learner health and teenage pregnancy.

And, of course, Every Child Matters (ECM) – which for many providers is still an essential framework for self-assessment. SMSC can contribute to all ECM outcomes by providing opportunities for young people to:

- develop positive relationships within the institution
- address issues around anti-social behaviour, bullying, intolerance and discrimination
- discuss a variety of sensitive and controversial issues. For example ethics in business and politics, homophobia, global terrorism, the consequences of social disadvantage and inequality
- enable young people to achieve social and personal development.

SMSC also has an important role in helping institutions respond to the Equality Act (2010), and its associated public sector duty, which requires institutions to take a more pro-active approach to the promotion of equality across nine sets of protected characteristics including the equality strand of religion and belief.

The Post-16 Common Inspection Framework (Ofsted 2009) also acknowledges and enhances the importance of SMSC development for learners. Inspection judgements now take account of the extent to which learners are able to:

'develop personal and social skills, including, as appropriate, spiritual, moral and cultural aspects (p46); 'develop relevant knowledge, understanding and skills which contribute to their economic and social

well-being' (p47); 'develop skills, knowledge and understanding relevant to community cohesion and sustainable development'.

(p. 50)

Inspectors also look for evidence that learners receive support to recognise diversity and promote equality and are able to access enrichment activities, such as work experience.

Before we get too excited by the strategic and institutional benefits of SMSC engagement, let us conclude by reminding ourselves of the overarching reason for promoting the integration of SMSC at the heart of curriculum design and vocational pedagogy. This is that it develops critical thinking by challenging learners to evaluate, question, judge and make sense of information based on evidence and an understanding of relative antecedents, contexts and viewpoints.

Embedding SMSC Provision Into Practice

SMSC needs to be embedded in the whole learning experience and environment. We have sought to argue that this not only serves an end in itself – facilitating effective citizenship – but also provides the essential experience and challenges that will help to develop learners' critical thinking skills, as both a social and a vocational/academic competence.

We are strongly advocating an SMSC-led vocational curriculum. The development of SMSC through tutorials, enrichment, foundation learning, whole institution events, pastoral support and volunteering is all good, however, if this were the sole means of delivery, it would still be somewhat 'bolted-on'. Supplemented by an SMSC-informed pedagogy, however, it becomes a fully integrated and whole organisational approach. Given current concerns about NEETs and disaffection amongst significant proportions of our young people, and the FE system's capacity and capability to address them, future research into SMSC may increasingly be seen as a priority.

Wright (1989) puts the case succinctly:

'...a morally educative school or college is one in which core moral values are reflected in all aspects of its life such that both students and staff directly experience those values in action; and that staff, preferable in collaboration with students, should examine the extent to which this is true in their own community and look for ways to make it more true'.

(p. 15)

There is already an expectation that teachers must facilitate a more holistic learning experience that extends beyond a narrow focus on specialist vocational skills. The national professional standards for teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLUK, 2007) point both directly and indirectly to aspects of SMSC (Table 3, below).

Table 3: A sample of professional standards for teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLUK, 2007)

AP 2.2: Encourage learners to recognise and reflect on ways in which learning can empower them as individuals and make a difference in their communities.
AP 3.1: Apply principles to evaluate and develop own practice in promoting equality and inclusive learning and engaging with diversity.
BP 1.2: Establish and maintain procedures with learners which promote and maintain appropriate behaviour, communication and respect for others, while challenging

discriminatory behaviour and attitudes.

BP 1.3: Create a motivating environment which encourages learners to reflect on, evaluate and make decisions about their learning.

BP 2.3: Implement learning activities which develop the skills and approaches of all learners and promote learner autonomy.

CP 1.2: Provide opportunities for learners to understand how the specialist area relates to the wider social, economic and environmental context.

Conclusion

We believe that an SMSC-embedded curriculum with a renewed emphasis on thinking skills development will have a significant impact on learner achievement at all levels. Bringing this about is a major challenge for colleges and other providers and has implications for initial and continuing teacher education. Teacher Educators will need to engage with research and evaluation on how best to build SMSC and the development of critical thinking into the teacher education curriculum. Such research might also usefully evaluate anecdotal evidence that a significant number of trainee teachers enrol on initial teacher education with little personal experience, themselves, of critical thinking and related academic writing skills. If this proves to be an accurate picture, we should be concerned because we need good critical thinkers to be able (and willing) to facilitate similar skills in their learners. Our experience at the East Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training has led us to be concerned and we have therefore felt it necessary to produce a guide (2010) for Teacher Educators on strategies for developing critical thinking and reflective practice throughout the delivery of initial training programmes.

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