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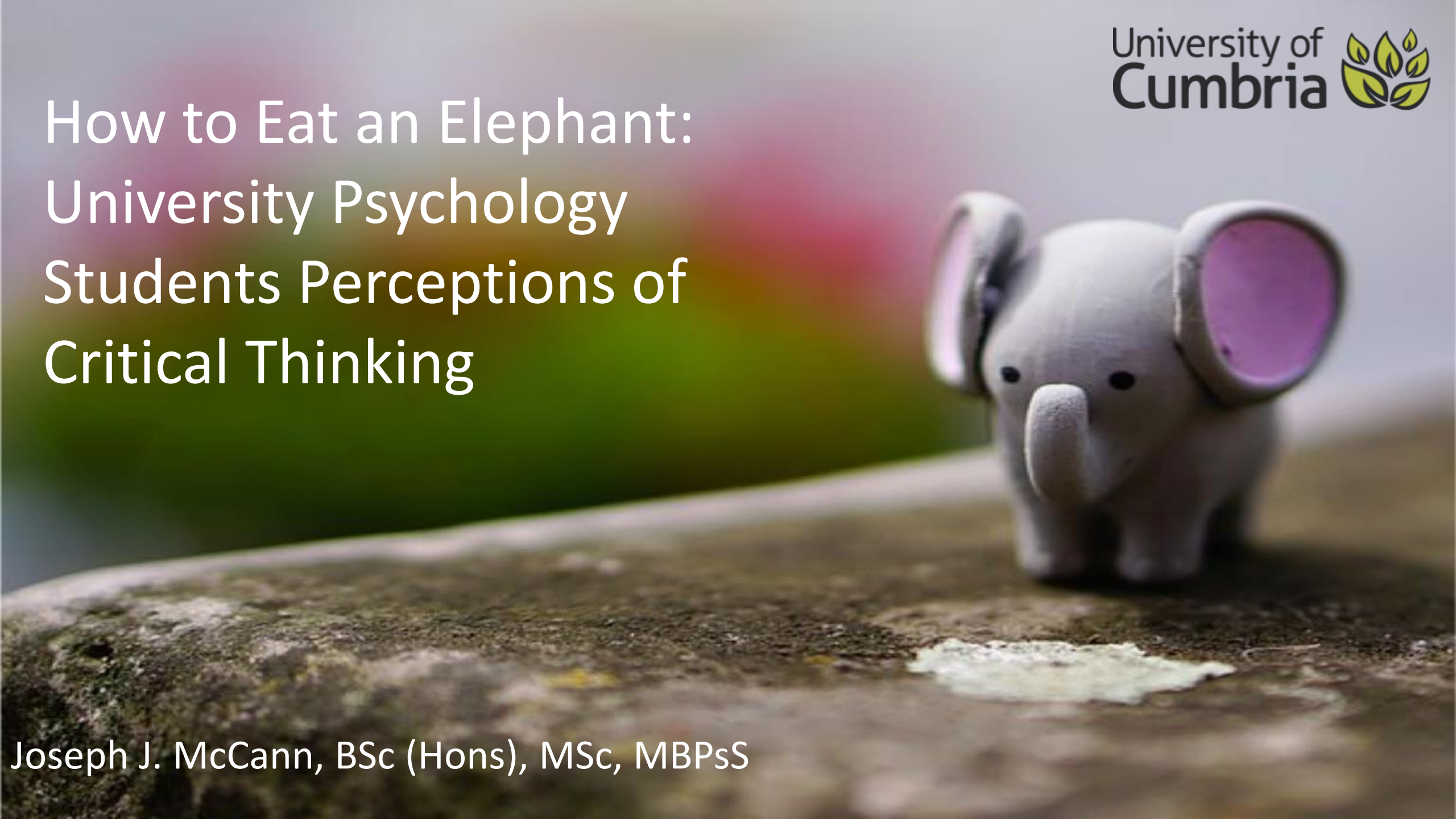
How to Eat an Elephant: University Psychology Students Perceptions of Critical Thinking



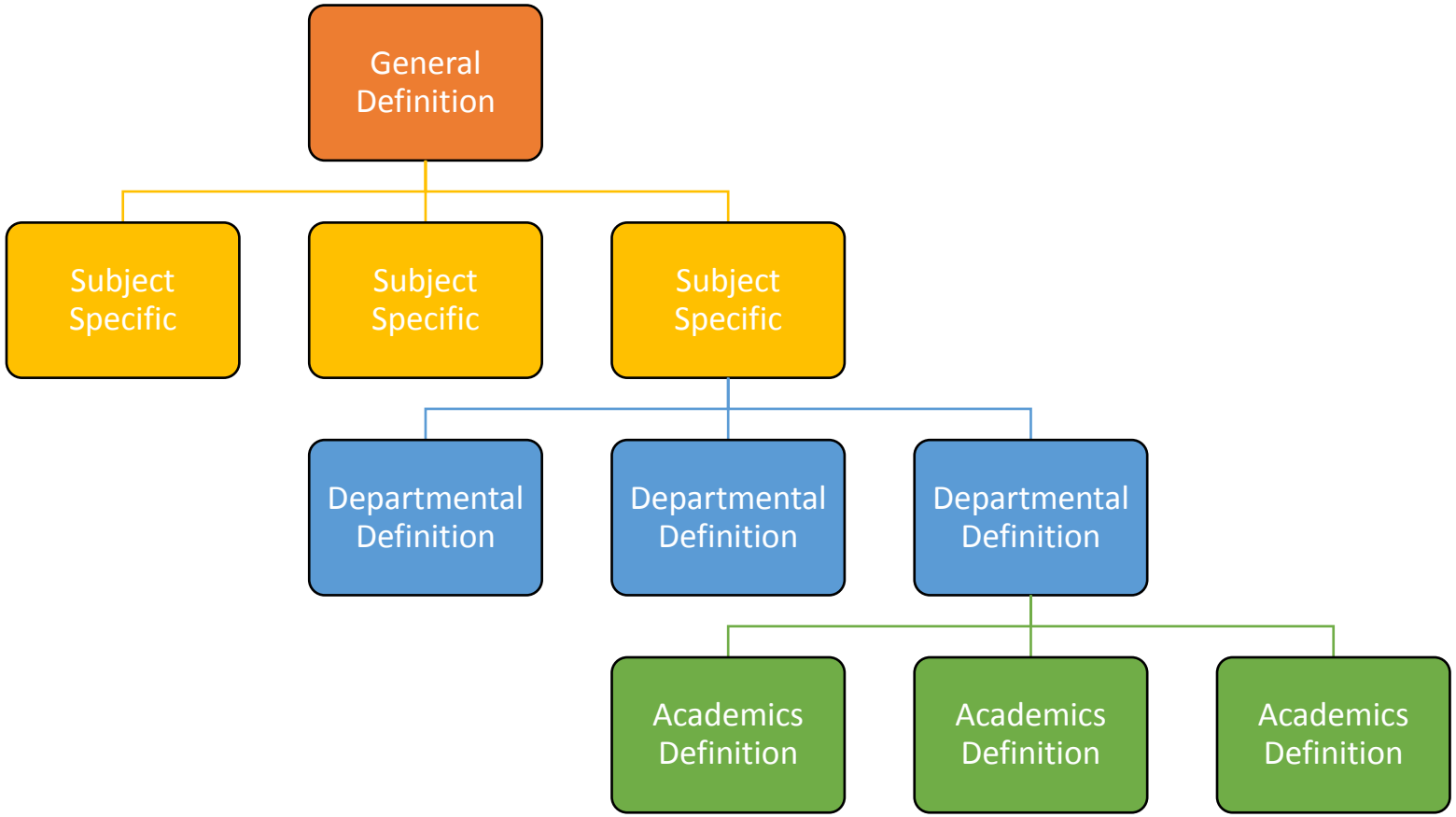
Joseph J. McCann, BSc (Hons), MSc, MBPsS

Overview

- To give you a brief overview of the critical thinking literature.
- To discuss the challenges associated with critical thinking instruction and research.
- To report findings on a study exploring university psychology students perceptions of critical thinking, using Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- To consider future directions and implications of research in a Post-TEF landscape.

What is Critical Thinking?

Definitions of Critical Thinking



Critical thinking Instruction

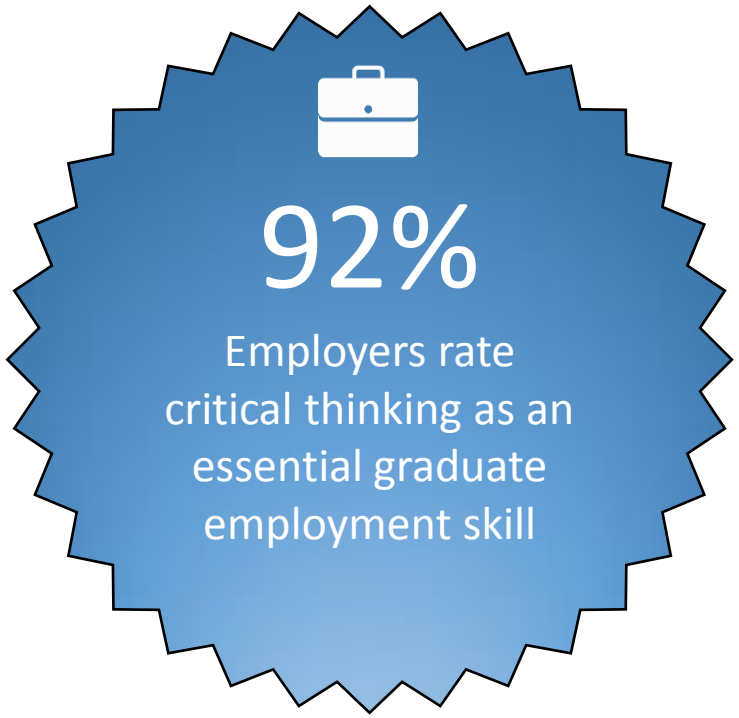
General

Immersion

Infusion

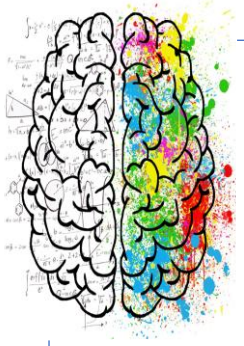
Mixed

Critical Thinking and Employment



(Stedman & Adams, 2014; Arum & Roska, 2011)

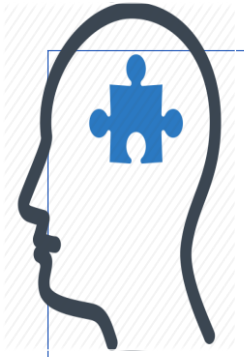
Critical Thinking and Psychology



Psychology is heavily intertwined with the notion of critical thinking (Dunn, Halonen & Smith, 2008)

Critical thinking in Psychology is about challenging the status quo and myths of research (Teo, 2011)

Students are encouraged to investigate why researchers are interested in studying what they study; including their underlying political, economic and personal interests (Danziger, 1997).



Students are encouraged to think about the impact of research results (Teo, 2008).

Previous Research

- Few studies focus on Psychology students and are UK based.
- Failure to see critical thinking instruction, as a reciprocal process (e.g. Halx & Reybold, 2005; Choy & Cheah, 2008).
- Incorrect conclusions of competency (Carlson, 2013; Rowles et al., 2013; Lloyd & Bahr, 2010).
- Lack of variation in study design (Tsui, 2002).
- Quantitative analysis decontextualizes critical thinking because it assumes it occurs in a vacuum (Pitchers & Soden, 2000).

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was to explore University Psychology students views and perceptions of Critical Thinking instruction.

- To broaden our understanding of critical thinking beyond test and measurement.
- To gain rich contextual evidence of the culture to which critical thinking is situated.
- To gain an understanding of the acquisition and transfer of critical thinking skills from the student perspective.

Methodology

Qualitative analysis was chosen as there has been little variation in research design with studies in critical thinking (Tsui, 2002). A conscious methodological decision was made to use Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clark, 2006).

- An inductive TA from a constructionist perspective.
- Coding was data driven.
- Participant responses were not fit into any pre-existing framework.
- The analysis to theorise the sociocultural context and structural conditions of the accounts.

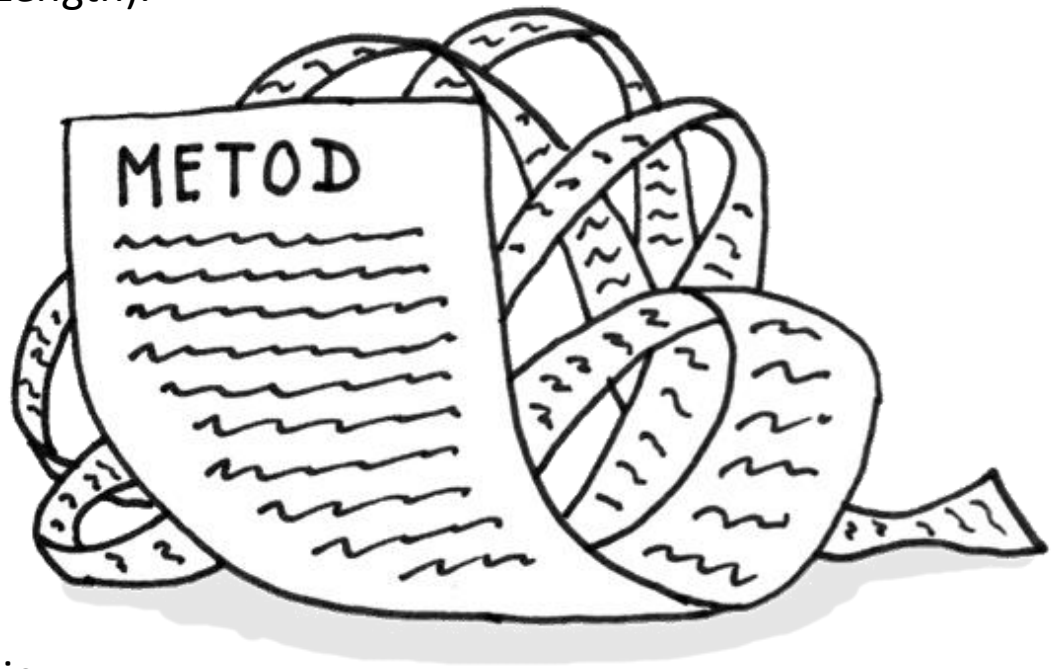
Method

Data Collection Method:

- Semi-Structured Interviews (Ranged from 25-90 Minutes in Length).

Sampling and Participants:

- Recruited via Psychology Society Social Media pages.
- 10 Participants (3 Males, 7 Females).
  - 3- 2nd Years
  - 6- 3rd Years
  - 1- Doctoral Student.



Inclusion Criteria:

- Current University Students.
- Studying Psychology.
- Over 18.

Interview Schedule:

- 12 interview questions were developed after a literature review.

Transcription and Analysis:

- Interview were manually analysed and transcribed using TA guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

Dimensions of the Academic Culture

- **A Culture of Progressivism**
- **A Sense of Intellectual Autonomy**
- Focus on Academic Attainment

Characteristics of a Critical Thinker

- Self-Confidence
- **Questioning Mindset**
- Consideration of Alternative Perspectives

Outside of Higher Education

- **Double-Edged Employability Sword**
- **Critical Thinking is an 'Alien Concept'**
- Developmental Aspects of Critical Thinking

A Culture of Progressivism

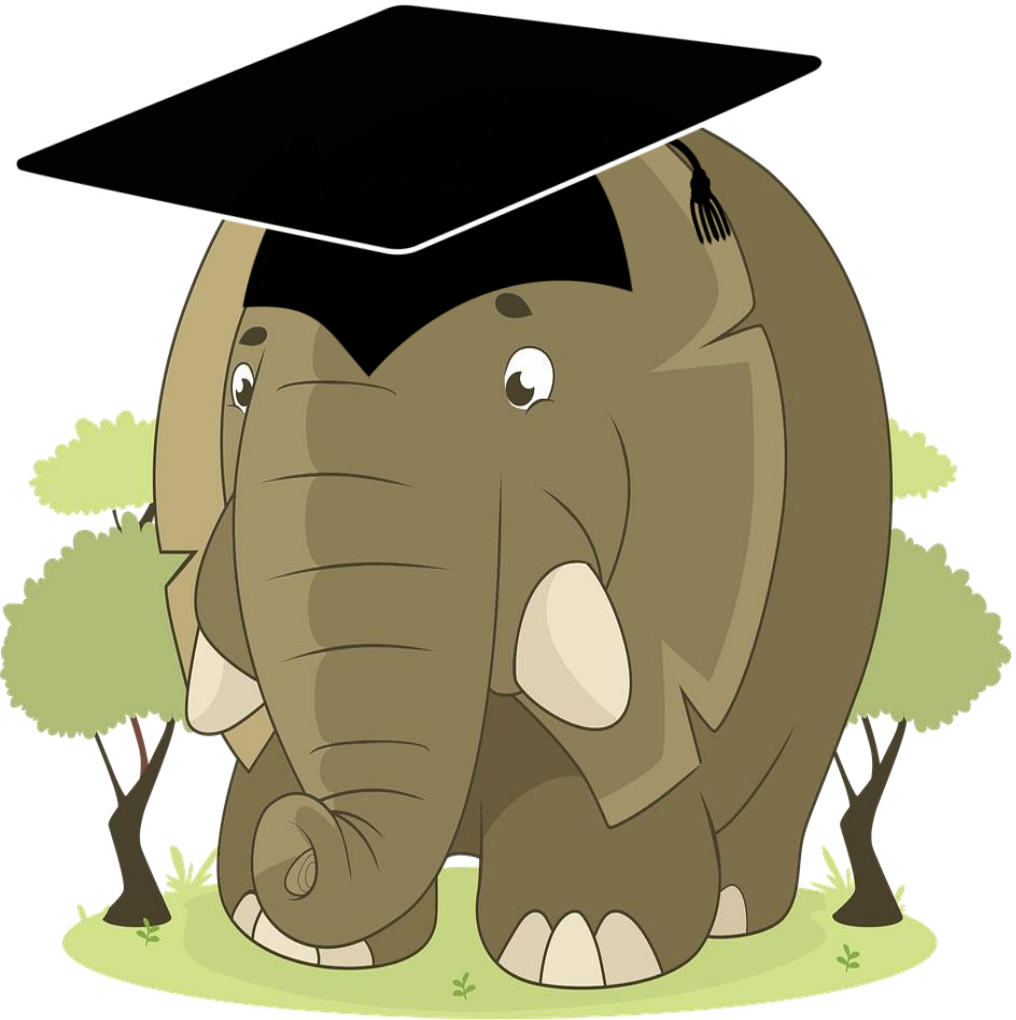
"The actual benefit to an education, the benefit to almost anything should be to make us better human beings; more productive in society, better able to help everyone else around us. You know just, it sounds you know idealistic, but I don't see the point in not being idealistic things aren't going to get better if we just accept the status quo"

"Because Psychology is always moving forward the aim is always to improve and to gain further understanding and things like that"

A Sense of Intellectual Autonomy

"Having the ability to critical think and having the ability to apply it makes me feel like, I am less naïve to other things so you just use it in everyday life really it makes me see the actually truth in things"

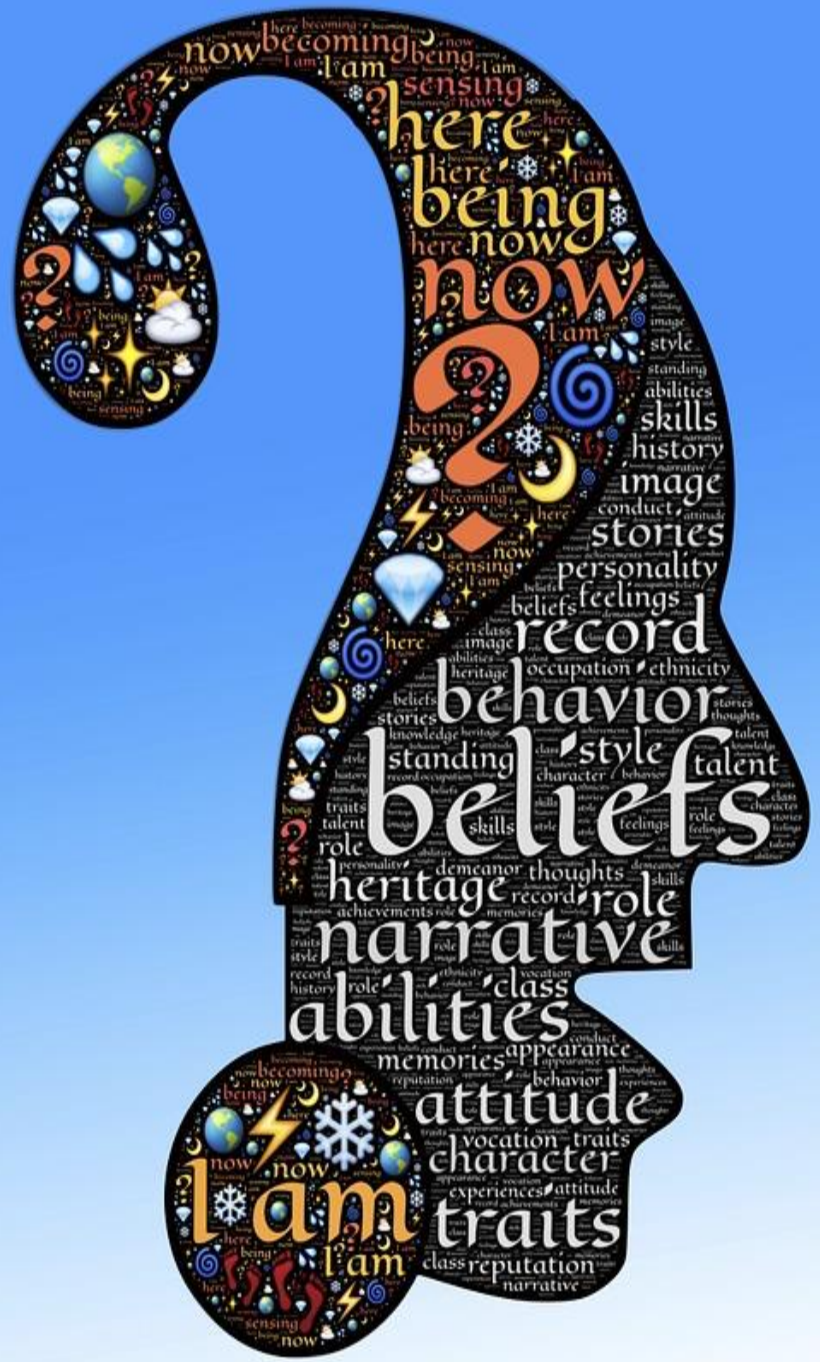
"I think it is important sort of see if you are not just following orders like a robot, you are analysing things you are told and you have to think about other people's interests"



Focus on Attainment

"Without being able to demonstrate critical thought and be critical of what you are doing, you simply won't get good grades"

"I can only really compare myself to other people and maybe it's not the best thing to do. But, I have looked at strengths and weaknesses, I spot more than other people do and I have better solutions to fix them that sounds a bit arrogant but it's just the way it is"



Questioning Mindset

"I think that that's what is probably is, there is probably a process that you could go through and you could make a list of all the methodological flaws that we have learned from over the years and you could check them off. I think you probably do it mentally, I guess because you think sample is that right, is it is it representative and so on but more often than not because you have internalised it"

"Thinking critically involves being able to say okay I see how you got from A to B to C and you know most of the time even when you consider and see how it is all laid out and see how a person got to a certain conclusion or whatever but hang on did you think about this?"

Employability the Double-Edged Sword

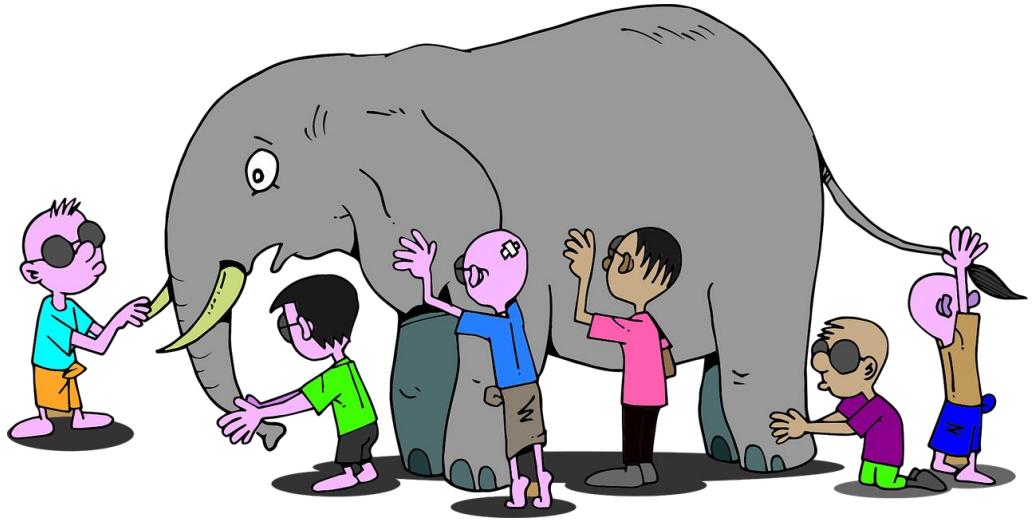
"I would say critical thinking is a barrier to being employed sometimes depending on the level you are, if you are on the lowest echelon absolutely not a good thing to be doing putting your hand up and asking why is the company making us do that and costing us money and costing us time that's idiotic"

"I suppose in the way that you identify something critically, I suppose it might be good because if you are being critical to like your boss or to a future boss or whatever you don't want to be… I don't know I suppose it could be negative in a way I suppose you don't want people to think that you are undermining them or but in a way it's sort of like its good at the same time"

Critical Thinking is an ‘Alien Concept’

“Well no one really tells you about it it’s not mentioned in high school or college or anything like that so then you come into Uni and you are being told that you have got to be critical… it’s in such demand at university how can we expect people to have those critical knowledge skills there, when we are not being taught it”

“At university you need to do this and you need to do that and it seems quite alien and quite scary. You are like, I have never done anything like this before I have never been critical about anything like this, before its makes it seem quite alien”



Implications in a ’Post-TEF’ landscape

- **Transforming assessment.**
  - Do student assessments authentically measure critical thinking skills?
- **Student access, retention and progression.**
  - Transition from A-level to University.
  - Critical thinking is an ’Alien Concept’.
  - Intervention.
- **Embedding employability.**
  - Bridge the gap between instructional intention and outcome.
  - Write programs in terms of critical thinking skills
- **Leadership of learning and teaching in disciplines.**
  - Evaluate the role critical thinking plays on our courses.
  - Focus on instruction.

Conclusions and Future Directions

- Critical thinking instruction in Psychology should focus less on the facets of any specific definition, but instead on the impact the acquisition of the skills can have.
- There needs to be further research into the potential gap in critical thinking skill acquisition that occurs between A-level and university.
- Finally, there needs to be future research looking into how higher education is preparing students for the transition to the 21st century workplace.

Any Questions?

Thank you for listening!
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