

A CRITICAL COMPANION TO
EARLY
CHILDHOOD

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The undergraduate journey

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Chapter overview

The chapter explores the professional and personal expectations of someone studying an ECEC (early childhood education and care) degree programme. It suggests that when using this book (or other study material) you recognise the interconnectedness between chapter content. It provides strategies for examining such interconnection as well as advice on developing your critical writing.

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that there are two types of student that access ECEC programmes at higher education level in the UK. There are those who have journeyed through A levels (who tend to enrol for a BA Honours degree, with a minimum of three years study) and those who enrol for a vocational route (a Foundation Degree over two or three years). They then have the option of enrolling (or what is called 'topping up' this qualification) to gain a BA Honours degree. In other countries around the world such progression routes may be different, though there is little doubt that a graduate professional is beneficial to young children's development, because of the professional understanding and ability to reflect on practice that such training brings (OECD, 2006, 2012). Whatever the journey, each pathway to graduate status will require different teaching approaches in order to develop the critical reflection

required. Supporting students through their transition into higher education is also a key focus of the tutors leading each programme. Degree students experience changes in environments, both physical and emotional, due to their level of practical experience and they must embrace different academic expectations.

When students are able to self-actualise, then critical thinking and hence critical reflection can be developed. This move from the transition phase to the critical thinking phase is shown in the pyramid in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 illustrates how the process involves entering new places, developing new ideas and embracing new friends, and is often accompanied by the uncertainty of what is expected of an undergraduate in terms of their study and academic performance. Much of the material you read says things like: *the programme you have enrolled for intends to support you in becoming a reflective practitioner with the qualities necessary to support children and families*. This is useful, but begs the question: what exactly does this mean in practice? Is there some end point to your studies when you suddenly arrive at a place where you receive a badge saying 'reflective practitioner'? This is unlikely to be the case because you gradually develop, grow and transform your thinking and practice into a meaningful pattern of thought

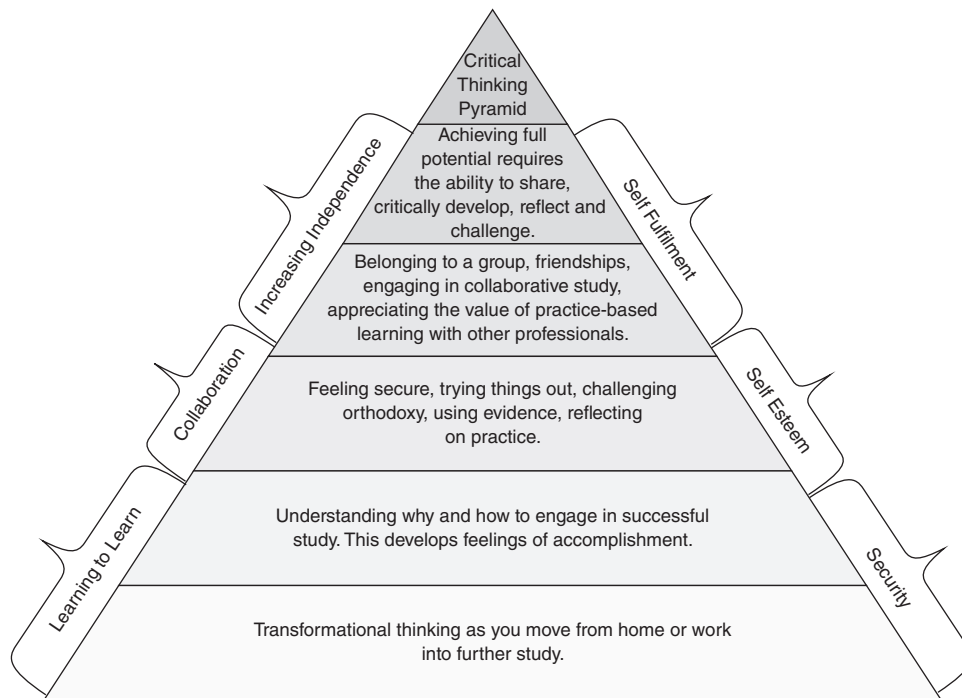


Figure 1.1 The different needs of each programme have been developed from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

which allows you to understand and question concepts and ideas. Study will also be transformative in that it will change your mind, your views, question your judgement and sometimes call into question your values and beliefs.

Measurement of the skills and qualities needed to be a competent early years professional

You may have completed previous qualifications where success is determined by meeting ‘standards’ and ‘competencies’ seen in practice. These competencies may represent an ideal state between having particular *skills* as a practitioner and the necessary *qualities* to engage purposefully with young children and their families. But are these so easily separated? Are they not interrelated? Indeed, a useful way of articulating the relationship between both aspects comes from a report on the subject from the European Commission in 2011. It suggests:

‘...being competent’ (a fully human attribute) is often reduced to ‘competencies’ – a series of skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals need to ‘possess’ in order to perform a particular task. A key finding of CoRe is that ‘competence’ in the early childhood education and care context has to be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. The *competent system* develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context. (CoRe, 2011: 21)

The position taken by CoRe underlines the need for those in training to become part of a competent system and encourages students and tutors to engage in joint initiatives to promote learning and critical reflection. This involves collaborations between individuals and teams (online and face to face) as well as universities and ECEC settings (pre-schools; schools; support services for children and families). It also requires a positive engagement in developing the position that the CoRe report suggests is a competent system. In essence this means having the ability to both engage and stand back simultaneously when involved in academic or practice aspects of your course. It means reflecting on your own values and attitudes which we see as essential and should accompany reflection on wider issues of practice. In this way, you can contribute to making meaningful and positive changes in early childhood learning environments. Of course, this means deepening your understanding of your own and others’ value base.

Initially developing a value base will require some type of guidance. For example working with and seeing others’ reflections and how they are linked to improvements in practice. This is a framework which should be embedded as part of normal day to day practices when learning in practice. It may occur when you are working with others in an ECEC setting either employed or as a student on placement. It is therefore crucial that reflection is integral to this part of your learning and is often best achieved through use of a learning log, diary or journal which should be kept throughout any placement undertaken. Alternatively, you may be asked to consider recording critical

incidents (to you and your learning) which in turn form descriptive and reflective questions in respect of a particular learning moment. Learning logs, diaries or journals are where you can record your experiences as a learner and can be hard copies and/or online. They are often used to underpin the reflective thinking process and may form part of the academic assessment for a module or programme of study. The reason is quite simple – they capture the moment and your thoughts. Entries are not retrospective and clouded in a vague memory of what went on – as learning is immediate and there is sometimes an emotional response as you are able to capture the emotion and reflection of the moment. The evidence gathered in this way can be shared with others, sometimes through a virtual learning (online) environment. Asking questions, testing hypotheses and finding ways forward by applying theory to/in practical situations underpins this skills development. Such an approach will cause you to consider your own position about ways to solve problems and engage purposefully in situations where collaborating with others is the key to improving your learning over a period of time. This can be directed by a tutor or self-directed within a study group. It can also involve active study with others – an example would be a student explaining to a fellow group of students a situation which is problematic and to which no obvious solution is evident. The group of participants asks questions and, together, they analyse the situation and formulate a possible solution.

Communicating in writing

Reflective writing can be seen as the natural relationship between learning and language (Hilsdon, 2006). It is the way you are most likely to articulate theory you are learning and applying in practice. It can be described as standing back or developing a wide view of the early childhood landscape. It can be seeing the familiar as if it is new, or seeing the unfamiliar from the perspective of a child or parent. Sometimes the outcome is not only about your knowledge of child development or an interpretation of a child's learning, it is what you have learned from the process. You are developing the ability to use words to express complex issues. It means using *evidence, information, explanation, interpretation* and a consideration of sometimes wide ranging *outcomes*. This of course forms the initials E-I-E-I-O which we hope for those who have ever sung a children's song about a farmyard makes this list a little easier to remember. In practice this means attempting to develop a clear and confident argument which may or may not accept the conclusions of other writers but will have attempted to evaluate the arguments and evidence they provide. It may suggest why the conclusions of other writers may need to be treated with caution – to just dismiss arguments is not reflecting critically. It means taking a position and sometimes defending that position, which is sometimes challenging and risky. It is then essential to identify how best they can be woven into the argument

that you are developing. This involves what Wellington et al. (2005) see as involving healthy scepticism: confidence but not arrogance; avoiding unsubstantiated arguments and a careful evaluation of published work. Of course, this is easy to say and difficult to do. There is a need to capture the narrative of what happened and use this to exemplify an aspect of practice and by the same token create an intellectual response that will gain marks for its critical reflection.

It is therefore important to develop your own academic voice but understand how this is best represented as you are assessed on a particular programme of study. Some tutors readily accept the use of 'I' and see this as a natural progression when articulating a reflective stance. There may be others that ask for different styles of interpretation that require a less personalised approach and a format which conveys objectivity. You may therefore need to develop a combination of the academic and the personal and consequently your arguments need to be quite clear about what constitutes the personal and professional aspects of your writing. Our advice is to check with tutors and be clear about the challenges and expectations placed upon any assessment requirements. In this way you are applying professional skills and behaviours and critically addressing the academic audience in the preferred style of your University or College. Such professionalism also incorporates your attitude and ability to write about what Bolton (2001) suggests are sensitive issues you may encounter when writing about practice. What you 'see' has to be represented in a way that is ethical and demonstrates professional propriety and not unsubstantiated criticism. Such sensitivity also extends to feedback on your own work because when you produce academic work you 'own' the subject and the process and it becomes personal to you. As a consequence tutor comments in your feedback can seem like criticism rather than the constructive support it is meant to offer. You can practise your planning and writing and we suggest that practice (or if you prefer careful planning and drafting of an assignment) is indeed an essential precursor to developing critical thinking and writing.

Critical Learning Activities

Here are three Critical Learning Activities (CLAs) which can be completed alone or with others, focusing on a particular theme, or focusing on a theme which is directed by a tutor. The first asks you to look at the chapter headings in this book. How will you use the chapters in your study? Will you interrogate the content so that when you come to use the content in an assignment you can provide a cohesive argument and perhaps show how one chapter theme can be seen as interconnected to another and in what way? For example, after reading a chapter (make notes, if you prefer, as you read), ask yourself the questions shown in Table 1.1.

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Table 1.1 Critical Learning Activity

Question	Notes
<i>Did the author make their professional experience and position clear?</i>	
<i>Was the writing accessible to you?</i>	
<i>Was there a balance between descriptive and critical writing? Were you able to tease out these features?</i>	
<i>Was the theoretical position of the chapter clear and was any 'conclusion' trailed and supported sufficiently by preceding evidence, analysis and argument?</i>	
<i>Are there elements in the content which you consider as interconnected to positions taken in other chapters?</i>	
<i>Did the chapter reflect on practice?</i>	
<i>Did anything in the content make you think and perhaps extend or change your views? If so, why?</i>	

This process moves your thinking away from 'knowledge transfer' and much more into a critical view of what the chapter had to say and a critique on why and how it was said. In essence, learning how to learn. We hope that by doing so you will revisit and engage with the content and arrive at arguments to support your education and the content of your assignments. It will be interesting to consider what features you felt important in a chapter. It may be that you clearly saw the interconnectedness between the theoretical perspectives on ethical practice from Sue Callan in Chapter 3 and the way ethicality is part of a professional stance when safeguarding children's well-being in Chapter 13 by Claire Richards. It might be the way Carla Solvason in Chapter 25 advocates the importance of being a purposeful ethical researcher. Importantly, the exercise may have caused you to consider carefully which particular words have potency when you attempt to write critically and underlined the importance of drawing upon resources at your University or College which assist in developing writing skills.

To help in identifying the interrelationship between chapters, look at Table 1.2 which takes each of the chapters and asks you to consider how they are interconnected. When you do this consider if the chapters share particular key issues which when taken together form a pattern which we hope you see as spanning many of the critical features about quality ECEC and what constitutes quality, as set out in the introduction to this book. Of course, you may engage in the exercise alone or with a small study group. It may be that you will be directed to the exercise via a study workshop as part of your course if the tutor thinks the activity suitable.

Table 1.2 Connecting chapters

Selected chapters	Key issues, ideas, concerns or questions	Full academic reference and page number, which you will need if you use a quote	How are issues interconnected with another chapter? The course or module you are studying?	Further reading to follow up
Chapter 1				
Chapter 2				
.....				

Critical writing

Introducing an issue, reinforcing a point with evidence and raising questions are things which may be done a number of times in an assignment. The process should inform the reader, demonstrate your critical thinking and arrive at a well-argued position. Below is ONE example of engaging in critical writing presented as a template. It is a way of practising and refining your writing style. As you do this, you may find you adapt, change or refine aspects of the template. In effect, practising and refining how to formulate a written argument.

Smith (2010) published research or wrote or edited a review, or explored **(description of the evidence)**. She suggests ... **(Make a specific point – provide a page reference if use is made of a direct quote)**. This is similar/contradicts/supports/is developed further by Jones (2011), when he explored ... **(Description of the evidence)**. He argues that ... **(make a specific point – provide a page reference if use is made of direct quote)**. Both views are interesting as they are contradictory/similar/support/allow a reconsideration of ... **(present the argument)**. When seen/considered/related/ to evidence in practice, for example... **(present evidence, discussion/analysis of what was seen in practice)**. When taken together the evidence indicates ... **(present your own ideas, views and thoughts)**.

writing about a particular theme or component part of an assignment

The theme may be one of a number of component parts identified within an assignment. These can be drawn together to show how they may be interconnected and how one aspect interacts with another. This shows the ability to critically reflect, transform and synthesise information. When writing, words are important – think about the words you might use (see Table 1.3).

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*(Continued)***Table 1.3** Words to use when writing

Phase of writing	Words you might use
Knowledge of a subject	arrange, define, duplicate, label, list, name, recognise, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce or state
Application of what you have learned or read	apply, choose, demonstrate, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practise, interrogate, solve, use, write
Analysis of practice	analyse, appraise, calculate, categorise, compare, contrast, criticise, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, question, test
Develop your own argument	demonstrate, refine, change, adjust, review
Comprehension of an area of study or practice	classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognise, report, select, interpret
Imitation of something that you have read or practice that can be replicated	copy, follow, adhere, construct, co-ordinate, develop, modify, adapt, change, reflect, consider, re-arrange, apply
Evaluation	appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, score, select, support, value, evaluate
To draw issues together and provide synthesis	re-assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, reflect, organise, plan, prepare, propose, set up, draw together

We hope these CLAs will assist you in developing your study skills and direct you to use the book as a critical companion. In conclusion we think it is important to say how critical thinking, reflection and representation through writing are all important and interconnected. To paraphrase our own words, you need to develop the ability to both engage and stand back simultaneously when involved in academic or practice aspects of your course. Therefore, do not read this chapter and put it to one side. As you progress in your studies, using Tables 1.1 and 1.2 to reflect and consider your own changing viewpoints. Finally, do practise your writing. Undergraduate study relies heavily on the written form as a way of representing your knowledge and understanding even though you may be asked to use other forms of representation, for example, verbal presentations, debates, position papers, online discussion, posters, video diaries, literature compendiums and academic reports. All require you to consider which information to report, offer some explanation about why these were chosen, consider if they reveal common features and critically explore their relevance to practice. The degree of accuracy, attention to detail and analysis matters.

Further reading, especially about enhancing your study skills as well as other materials to help your studies, is below.

Useful websites

- <http://youtu.be/nWqMQ26Gqi4>

Essay writing, ten minute video on YouTube. Quite instructive and useful to watch.

- <http://youtu.be/tAmgEa1B1vI>

Useful ten minute guide to essay writing and presenting an argument, on YouTube.

- <http://youtu.be/-HutuMqTAPw>

Ten minute video on sequencing language – for essay writing – quite useful for novice writers.

Further reading

Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Open University.

Bolton, G. (2010) *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. London: SAGE.

Cottrell, S. (2013) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 4th edn. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Smale, R. and Fowle, J. (2009) *How to Succeed at University: An Essential Guide to Academic Skills and Personal Development*. London: SAGE.

Wellington, J., Bathmaker, A., Hunt, C., McCulloch, G. and Sikes, P. (2005) *Succeeding with your Doctorate*. London: SAGE. This offers some suggestions for distinguishing between the academic and the non-academic voice (p.84).

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Maslow, A.H. (1943) 'A theory of human motivation', *Psychological Review*, 50(4): 370–96. Available at: <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm> (accessed 5 January 2013).

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