

## Critical Thinking Futures

Justin Hayes, Paul Pasquaretta, and Glenda Pritchett

Quinnipiac University

The value of higher education in the United States tends to be addressed in terms of the postmodern commodification of knowledge. As Lyotard (1984) reported, the grand narratives of modernity, which had unified knowledge and legitimated it as Truth or Emancipation, have disintegrated into incommensurate language games, fragmenting knowledge, which is now legitimated by *performativity*. According to Lyotard, each game consists of rules that form among its players a consensus on which utterances, or moves, are meaningful, with the objective of the game being to produce, with maximum efficiency, knowledge as a commodity: a game is legitimated when investment in it *is exceeded by* the economic value of the knowledge it produces; conversely, a game is delegitimated when investment in it *exceeds* the economic value of the knowledge it produces. As college tuition costs continue to outpace median income, with student loan debt having collectively surpassed a staggering \$1.5 trillion, what return on an investment in the game of higher education can be expected by graduates entering a highly competitive global economy?

It seems uncertain. Writing in *Inside Higher Ed*, Schlueter (2016) argued that with digital technology making information widely available, the purpose of colleges and universities must be to teach the critical thinking skills necessary to process that information. Having surveyed a number of university mission statements, Schlueter observed that higher education has indeed come to widely promote critical thinking as its central learning outcome. But at the same time, he contended, there exists as yet no consensus on what critical thinking is, whether it exists, and whether it can be taught. Given the stakes involved, it is clear, according to Schlueter, that “higher education has gambled on critical thinking” (para. 7) and that it needs to secure a consensus on it “if we are not to lose our shirts on this bet” (para. 22).<sup>1</sup>

Schlueter’s (2016) discussion of critical thinking suggests a conflict within performativity between how this knowledge operates and its legitimation in economic terms. As a *gamble* on what students *will* be able to do *by graduation*, critical thinking has essentially become a commodity in the futures market. The uncertainty of its value is, however, due not to the vicissitudes of the market but to an instability of the rules needed to produce critical thinking as a clear and coherent product, which can thereby be assigned a value. Consider that, beginning in 1981, when college tuition costs began to increase sharply,<sup>2</sup> so did the frequency of the phrase “critical thinking” appearing in American English books.<sup>3</sup> It seems that as investment in the game of higher education has grown, it has been played more often. And yet, despite the stakes having been raised over these last four decades, research over this period has shown a range of critical thinking definitions, theories, and test results, reflecting, both implicitly and explicitly, variations in the rules of the game. So if higher education has gambled on critical thinking, it is a wager in which final gains or losses seem to be deferred indefinitely and can, therefore, be neither legitimated nor delegitimated by performativity.

This sustained commitment to critical thinking may, however, be explained by Lyotard's (1984) suggestion of *paralogy* as an alternative criterion for legitimation. In Lyotard's use of the term, *paralogy* refers to moves that are "beyond reason" because they violate the rules of a language game. Such moves generate counterexamples, inconsistencies, and contradictions that undermine consensus and thereby disrupt the production of knowledge. But these moves can also prompt a change to the rules, leading to the formation of new and diverse language games within which the moves become meaningful. And with each new game, consensus serves only as a temporary means by which to identify new problems, so that knowledge, created through *dissensus*, is heterodox and open-ended.

With performativity replaced by paralogy to legitimate knowledge, critical thinking is no longer a commodity of indeterminable value but instead a sign of higher education's *resistance to* the commodification of knowledge. This shift enables those of us who are players in the game of higher education to recognize its persistent unruliness as a proliferation of new language games by which knowledge of critical thinking is generated in disparate ways. Unbound by consensus, and injunctions to maintain it, we might, as an exercise of academic freedom, already see in this volume of *Double Helix* several games of the future—a reading of critical thinking that may be a legacy of modernity's Truth and Emancipation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Schlueter's (2016) view of critical thinking in higher education may be representative of perspectives outside the United States as well. For example, Hernández (2016) reported that the Chinese government, which has been "betting" (para. 4) on the critical thinking of its university students to produce innovations in science and technology in order to boost its slowing economy, expressed concern over the findings of a recent study (partially financed by a Shanghai venture capitalist) that showed the critical thinking skills of its students to be lagging behind those of their American and Russian counterparts.

<sup>2</sup>For an accounting of college tuition costs in academic years 1971–1972 through 2018–2019, see Hess (2019).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, a survey of the corpus in the Google Books Ngram Viewer: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=critical+thinking&year\\_start=1971&year\\_end=2008&corpus=5&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Ccritical%20thinking%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=critical+thinking&year_start=1971&year_end=2008&corpus=5&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Ccritical%20thinking%3B%2Cc0).

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