

Can Critical Thinking Still Be Taught in the Age of AI? Reframing Criticality through Reflective Practitioner Inquiry in Educational Theory

The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified debates about the future of critical thinking in higher education. As AI systems increasingly generate arguments, summarise texts, and simulate reasoning, educators face a central question: can critical thinking still be taught when many of its visible performances are technologically reproduced? This paper argues that it can, but only if critical thinking is reconceptualised as a distinctly human capacity for judgement, interpretation, and meaning-making rather than a transferable skill set (Freire, 1970; Biesta, 2022).

Using reflective practitioner inquiry within Educational Theory modules at a South African university, the paper examines student engagement with complex theoretical texts in a multilingual context where many students are isiXhosa- or Afrikaans-speaking and learn through English as an additional language. Here, generative AI increasingly functions as a tool for epistemological access, supporting navigation of disciplinary language and concepts. However, it may also enable outsourcing of intellectual labour, allowing students to bypass sustained reading, interpretation, and deliberation through which critical thinking is developed.

Educational Theory provides a productive site for humanising pedagogy because it engages students with competing educational perspectives and enduring questions of power, knowledge, and justice. The paper argues that AI does not threaten critical thinking itself, but exposes the fragility of skill-based conceptions by revealing how easily intellectual processes can be simulated. The central challenge is therefore not survival but reconstitution: how to preserve epistemic agency, critical reading, and judgement in AI-mediated environments.

The paper concludes that humanising pedagogy in the age of AI requires sustaining forms of intellectual engagement that remain irreducibly human, ensuring that students are not merely consumers of AI-generated interpretations but active meaning-makers in higher education.