

4E Critical thinking ability depends on whom you live with

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A couple whose three children are recent HE graduates remarked that, while they couldn't be sure what specifically each of them had learned at university, they now argued with their parents in quite a different way. This is music to the ears of those who see critical thinking (CT) as the chief graduate attribute and benefit of a higher education.

Our study used Ennis' test of CT as the main outcome variable and analysed a variety of demographic data for clues about factors which seemed to have promoted CT. Contrary to our prior expectations, there was no evidence that living on vs. off campus, or living in parental homes vs. student accommodation, were directly important. Instead, the most statistically significant associations concerned with whom the student lived. Best average scores were for students living with friends; next were for those living with parents; lowest were for living alone or with others who were not friends.

An interpretation of this is that CT depends upon practice at discussion involving giving and assessing reasons; and furthermore that it is opportunity for informal discussion and not planned education which is the most important factor for this. No significant association of CT with discipline was found, as would be the case if the differences in teaching-led demands for discussion were the important variable (whether due to disciplinary differences, or to teaching habits in different departments).

A further inference might be that the most important feature of undergraduate education is whom you live with, and that this could be the biggest drawback to online and distance education. It also suggests that in general, staff and students are equally oblivious to the key educational value of discussion; otherwise critical thinking skill would not depend upon whom you live with but instead on deliberately arranged discussion.