Head start to university part 3 – Acknowledging the work of others

Hello and welcome to our third instalment of Head start to university presentations. In this talk we're focusing on what 'academic thinking' looks like, and the importance in your studies of learning to acknowledge, respect and respond to the work of other academics in your subject. Now, if you've been following and engaging with this series, you'll remember in session 1 we were talking about the importance of getting to know who the top academics are in your field. Hopefully by now you'll be familiar with at least some of them.

This session looks at how you might start to interact with these ideas. Before we go on, though: a disclaimer – this session is most relevant to essay-based subjects; it may not be so relevant for purely scientific disciplines.

What I want to get across in this session is why it matters that you learn to acknowledge and respond to the work of others – not least it's because it's the only way you can participate in the 'community of learning' we were talking about in the first presentation. Being able to take part in an academic conversation – and learning how to communicate that in writing – is really key. In fact, citing evidence and the thinking of others is what makes academic work academic!

As a way in, we need to start thinking about what academic thinking is, and what makes it different from the everyday thinking we do as humans. We'll do this via two case studies.

The first one shows us how we start to think in an academic way.

Let's start with a common enough scenario. You've started uni here at Egham. You're wondering about the best way to commute from Windsor, where you live. You have a chat with some friends about it, and weigh up in a very informal way, the various pros and cons of different travel options, the train vs bus vs buying a car vs cycling etc. You say things like 'well, the bus is really slow and expensive over time; the train's much quicker but then there's the walk to and from the station at either end, which lengthens the journey time; buying a car will be really expensive, with tax, insurance, running costs etc' You might guestimate some maths about which option is likely to be the quickest and cheapest and base your decision on that and then move on with your life.

This is good. Essentially what you've been doing in your conversation is some rudimentary critical thinking, but what you've been doing isn't academic, for two reasons: first, it's all about you, and second, you're not using any evidence.

Now to make this scenario more academic, to start thinking a little more academically, we need to find evidence. At a basic level, this might involve fishing out real data about journey times: how many minutes does it actually take to get from Windsor to campus on the various forms of transport. You'd do something similar with the cost: what is the exact train/bus fare? What exactly would be the running costs for a small car?

If you could be bothered to do this, you might arrive at a 'better', more rational decision! This thinking is getting to be more academic, as it's more evidence-based, but it's still all about you, and it doesn't consider the opinions of other academics!

To really start thinking academically about this, we need to think of it as a general problem affecting other people other than you. That general problem might be sustainability and the climate. It's quite easy to imagine an essay question along the lines of 'critically assess transport sustainability issues in an area of your choice. Discuss and prioritise the challenges and recommend feasible steps to reduce car use by 30% by 2030'.

Now tackling a question like this is going to take more than a chat with your mates about the most convenient way to get from A to B. Ultimately, the steps you recommend will need to be based on solid evidence, not guestimations. So what evidence would you need to tackle this question? You might want to pause the video at this point to jot down some ideas.

So, how did you get on?

Now there's really two types of evidence that you can bring in to help you solve this particular problem. First, you can make use of what's called *primary evidence*, such as local newspaper reports or social media threads flagging particular areas of concern; you might want to investigate local government policymaking, and any studies (e.g. on vehicle use) that have been carried out on behalf of the local council. And so on. So this is primary, or first-hand evidence. The other kind of evidence we can use is *secondary evidence*. So, this might take the form of academic articles about sustainability and vehicle use. Judicious searching of the College library and/or Google Scholar would help with this.

So hopefully that little example has shown you how we get from everyday thinking to academic thinking – essentially what makes academic thinking academic is being able to use evidence effectively.

Now, why does this matter? Well, academic thinking is a useful corrective against the rather inconvenient truth that humans don't generally tend to make great decisions, particularly in areas that require a risk assessment. We tend to be ruled by our hearts and emotions rather than our heads. And this brings us to our second case study. I should say that this is based on the prologue to a very interesting book called *Risk* by Dan Gardner.

Gardner recounts how the 9/11 terrorist attacks garnered much media coverage, and how they resulted in people refusing to fly in the weeks following the attacks. Understandably. So even when flights resumed a few days after 9/11, very few people were on the planes. People switched to driving. But what people forgot was that the mathematical risk probability remained exactly the same, despite the attacks. Air travel remained and remains far, far safer than driving: as Gardner observes, 'the most dangerous part of a typical commercial flight is the drive to the airport'.

So what this meant was that the thousands of people who elected to drive rather than fly in the wake of 9/11 were subjecting themselves to much greater levels of risk. And in fact many more people did in fact die on America's roads as a result of the increase in traffic after 9/11. 1,592 in fact, or just over half of the death toll of 9/11 itself. We know this because of a 2006 research paper penned by Berlin psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer, who painstakingly assembled vehicle fatality data from five years before to five years after 9/11.

So this is a great example of the value of good, evidence-based academic work. Good academic work helps us see things in perspective, and helps us make decisions based on evidence rather than intuition and emotion. Facts matter, as this case clearly illustrates.

Now you might be thinking, what has this got to do with my degree? Well, although your academic tasks won't be as dramatic as that of Gigerenzer's, the point is that good academic work needs to stand up to scrutiny. Readers need to know where the various claims are coming from and what proof is being offered to back up these claims. Otherwise, why should the reader believe what you write?

As a student, you will need to learn to take responsibility for the claims you make in your academic work, which means being transparent about where your ideas and evidence are coming from. You will learn about the importance of acknowledging the work of others and how to do this using an appropriate referencing system – in fact one of the tasks in the accompanying activities will give you a taster of this.

In short, referencing should not be seen as a chore, but an integral part of academic work; work that isn't referenced – in most disciplines – simply isn't academic, for the reasons we've been discussing.

So, to summarise this talk:

- Recognise what academic thinking is and how it differs from everyday thinking
- Recognise the value of rigorous academic work
- Be aware that what makes academic work academic is using and citing evidence
- It is your responsibility to earn to acknowledge, respect and respond to the academic work of others

Please have a go at the accompanying tasks – they will help you contextualise the ideas presented in this talk, and get you thinking about what academic thinking means for your subject, and what it means in your subject to acknowledge the work of others.