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# Contesting Criticality: Epistemological and Practical Contradictions in Critical Reflection

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**Abstract:** *Being critical is not an unequivocal concept. It is, rather, a contested idea. How the terms critical or criticality are used reflects the ideologies of the users.*

Consider the different ways people define what it means to learn in a critical way at the workplace. For some, critical learning, thinking and reflection are represented by executives' use of lateral, divergent thinking strategies and double loop learning methods. Here adult workers learn criticality when they examine the assumptions that govern business decisions by checking whether or not these decisions were grounded in an accurately assessed view of market realities. Inferential ladders are scrutinized for the false rungs that lead business teams into, for example, a disastrous choice regarding the way in which a brand image upsets a certain group of potential customers. The consequence of this exercise in criticality is an increase in profits and productivity, and a decrease in industrial sabotage and worker alienation. Capitalism is unchallenged as more creative or humanistic ways are found to organize production or sell services. The free market is infused with a social democratic warmth that curtails its worst excesses. The ideological and structural premises of the capitalist workplace remain intact.

For others, critical learning in a business setting cannot occur without an explicit critique of capitalism. This kind of learning at the workplace involves workers' questioning the morality of relocating plants to Mexico or Honduras where pollution controls are much looser and labor is much cheaper. It challenges the demonizing of union members as corrupt Stalinist obstructionists engaged in a consistent misuse of power. It investigates the ways in which profits are distributed, and the conditions under which those profits are generated. It points out and queries the legitimization of capitalist ideology through changes in language; for example, the creeping and ever more widespread use of phrases such as "buying into" or "creating ownership" of an idea, the description of students as "customers," or the use of euphemisms such as "downsizing" or

worse, "rightsizing" (with its implication that firing people restores some sort of natural balance to the market) to soften and make palatable the reality of people losing their livelihoods, homes, marriages, self-respect and hope. In terms of critical theory the workplace is transformed when cooperative democracy and worker control replace the distribution of profits among shareholders. The factory councils in Turin, the Clydeside Shipbuilding (Scotland) sit-in, the 1968 occupation of the Renault factory outside Paris – these would be examples of workplace learning in this perspective.

How is it that the same term can be used to refer to such different activities? To understand the concept of criticality properly we need to disentangle the different, and often conflicting, intellectual traditions informing its use. Some predominant traditions informing criticality are: ideology critique as seen in Neo-Marxism and the work of the Frankfurt School of critical social theory, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and pragmatist constructivism.

## Traditions of Criticality

Ideology critique, the first tradition to be examined, is a term associated with Marxism and thinkers from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, particularly Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. As a learning process ideology critique describes the ways in which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. As an educational activity ideology critique focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes social relations and imposes – often without our knowledge – belief systems and assumptions (i.e. ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity. To the contemporary educational critic Henry Giroux, "the ideological dimension that underlies all critical reflection is that it lays bare the historically and so-

cially sedimented values at work in the construction of knowledge, social relations, and material practices .... It situates critique within a radical notion of interest and social transformation” (1983, p. 154, 155). An important element in this tradition is the thought of Antonio Gramsci whose concept of hegemony explains the way in which people are convinced to embrace dominant ideologies as always being in their own best interests. Gramsci points out that because people have to learn hegemonic values, ideas and practices, and because schools play a major role in presenting these ideas as the natural order of things, hegemony must always be understood as an educational phenomenon. For Jack Mezirow—probably the most influential contemporary theorist of adult learning-doing ideology critique is equivalent to what he calls ‘systemic’ critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions. Ideology critique contains within it the promise of social transformation and it frames the work of influential activist adult educators such as Freire, Tawney, Williams, Horton, Coady and Tomkins.

A second more psychoanalytically and psychotherapeutically inclined tradition emphasizes criticality in adulthood as the identification and reappraisal of inhibitions acquired in childhood as a result of various traumas. Mezirow (1981) writes of “the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (p. 6). Using the framework of transformative learning, theorists like Gould emphasize the process whereby adults come to realize how childhood inhibitions serve to frustrate them from realizing their full development as persons. This realization is the first step to slaying these demons, laying them to rest, and living in a more integrated, authentic manner. Different theorists emphasize differently the extent to which the development of new social structures is a precondition of a newly constituted, integrated personality. Carl Rogers, for example, sees significant personal learning and personal development as occurring through individual and group therapy, and he does not address wider political factors—an omission he regretted in his last book *A Way of Being*. Others, such as Erich Fromm and Ronald Laing argue that personality is socially and politically sculpted. Schizophrenia and madness are socially produced phenomena representing the internal con-

traditions of capitalism. The rise of totalitarian and fascist regimes are made possible by the way ideologies structure personality types that yearn for order, predictability and externally imposed controls. To radical psychologists such as Laing and neo-Marxists like Fromm, individual and social transformation cannot be separated. For the personality to be reconstituted, insane and inhumane social forms need to be replaced by congenial structures and the contradictions of capitalism reconciled. In *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961) Fromm argues that the young Marx was convinced that the chief benefit of socialist revolution would be the transformation of the personality, the creation of a new kind of humanitarian citizen.

A third tradition invoked when defining criticality is that of pragmatist constructivism. This tradition emphasizes the way people learn how to construct, and deconstruct, their own experiences and meanings. Constructivism rejects universals and generalizable truths, and focuses instead on the variability of how people make interpretations of their experience. This strand of thought maintains that events happen to us but that experiences are constructed by us. Pragmatism emphasizes the importance of continuous experimentation to bring about better (in pragmatist terms, more beautiful) social forms. It argues that in building a democratic society we experiment, change, and discover our own, and others’, fallibility. Democracy is the political form embraced by pragmatism since it fosters experimentation with diversity. Cherryholmes (1999) writes that “pragmatism requires democracy” since “social openness, inclusiveness, tolerance and experimentation generate more outcomes than closed, exclusive, and intolerant deliberations” (p. 39). Elements of these two traditions are evident in parts of John Dewey’s work and they have filtered, via the work of Eduard Lindeman into adult education’s concern with helping people understand their experience, and with the field’s preference for experiential methods. In Myles Horton’s renowned work at Highlander a largely constructivist approach was allied with a tradition of ideology critique to help activists realize that their own experience – properly analyzed in a collaborative but critical way – could be an invaluable resource in their fight for social justice.

### **Epistemological Contradictions**

The intellectual traditions that surface in the dis-

course surrounding critical reflection generate some epistemological contradictions centering on the way we believe we come to accurate knowledge of reality. Two of the traditions—ideology critique and psychoanalysis/psychotherapy—work with largely objectivist conceptions of knowledge. An objectivist conception holds that there are truths ‘out there’ waiting to be revealed and that if people study the world long and hard enough they will stumble on these. Such truths will be verified according to intellectual standards based on the production of verifiable evidence. Research purporting to build a universal theory of adult learning, or to establish best practices in adult education, springs from this objectivist conception. This conception is firmly modernist and representational. Ideology critique, for example, holds that the oppressive nature of social reality is discoverable. Doing this is beset with difficulties created by false consciousness and by entrenched power structures working to mask their existence; but, after long and sometimes bloody struggle, ideology critique contends that false consciousness and hegemony can be penetrated to reveal the world as economically determined. Knowing, in ideology critique, is coterminous with realizing how ideology springs from, and supports, the material conditions of capitalism. The more one understands how social and economic inequities continue to reproduce themselves, the closer one comes to full knowledge. The better we understand the nature of hegemony and the way oppression manifests (and seeks to cloak) itself, the nearer we are to truth. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy also hold out the possibility of coming to truth through the acquisition of self-knowledge. Some argue that clinical disturbance must be understood as a manifestation of wider social psychosis caused particularly by the contradictory logic and momentum of capitalism. Others see adult self-actualization as the removal of inhibitions, distortions and anxieties learned through earlier family and interpersonal relationships. Both schools of thought, however, subscribe to the view that moving towards a state of being that is more integrated and authentic is possible. In this state we have greater self-knowledge. We know better why we are the way we are and we know what forces are impeding us from reaching our fullest potential. If we could just remove or control these forces (so the argument goes) we could ascend to a state of grace in which our inner desires and dispositions matched more congenially

the outer features of our existence.

The subjectivist conception of knowledge, by way of contrast, rejects the idea of any commonly understood notion of reality. Its epistemology views knowledge as malleable, as individually, socially and culturally framed. There is no universal truth waiting to be uncovered through diligent analysis. Experience is open to multiple interpretations and the exact meaning of any event will often be contested by participants who perceive it in wildly divergent ways. Each interpretation will, of course, appear internally coherent, all of a piece. These days this view is usually articulated via postmodernism, as if postmodernism represented a qualitatively new way of understanding. Yet subjectivism has found expression in many earlier intellectual traditions such as constructivism and pragmatism. Constructivism’s emphasis on people as the authors of their own experiences, the creators of their own meanings, stands steadfastly against any idea of their being one way of apprehending reality or interpreting meaning. In its place it argues for a multiplicity of meanings, a plethora of perceptual possibilities. Constructivism does not deny the importance of social and cultural forces in shaping the interpretive filters we apply to experience, but it does argue that since social contexts are so diverse, the possible ways of interpreting experiences will be similarly boundless. A constructivist understanding of oppression emphasizes the role of humans as constructors of their own oppression, and in this sense intersects with theorists of hegemony. But constructivism does not immediately assume that a person’s sense of oppression is necessarily matched by any objective, material reality; that is, by a clearly discernible state of political and economic inequity forced on unwilling subjects. Constructivism also views oppression as contextual, so that one person can easily and continuously switch between being oppressor and oppressed, or inhabit both states at the same moment. Constructivism, too, takes everyday experience seriously, not immediately assuming it to be a manifestation of false consciousness. Pragmatism’s emphasis on experimentation and contingency also leans away from objectivism. Although pragmatism argues for the pursuit of beautiful consequences, these do not assume any fixed form. Beauty is seen as truly in the eye of the beholder and open to multiple definitions. Pragmatism holds that all theory, indeed all practice, is provisional and open to reformulation. It

anticipates postmodernism in encouraging an ironic skepticism regarding claims to universal explanations and in delighting in playing with unpredictable possibilities .

### **Practical Contradictions**

The foregoing epistemological contradictions have numerous practical consequences for adult education. Adult educators who interpret critical reflection from within the objectivist traditions of ideology critique and psychotherapy will be likely to have a more fixed idea of what critically reflective adult education, properly practiced, looks like. There may well be a tendency to seek ideologically correct templates of practice such as democratic discussion, problem-posing education and culture circles, all of which will be taken to signify a commitment to justice and equity. For those working within the subjectivist traditions of constructivism and pragmatism a more flexible methodology with an emphasis on experimentation will probably be apparent. There will be a preference for learner-centered approaches and an openness to practices that are invented on the spot, contextually responsive.

One set of tensions arises from the commonly espoused commitment to a negotiated curriculum. Those working within the ideology critique tradition are much concerned with the problem of false consciousness and warn of the dangers of taking students' definitions of needs at face value. The false consciousness position holds that since students are caught within hegemony and have had no exposure to anti-capitalistic or anti-totalitarian possibilities, any negotiation that transpires will merely sustain what Newman (1999) calls liberal hegemony. Since students are comfortable with what they already know they will request more of that, meaning that liberalism and capitalism will go unchallenged. According to this view the process of negotiation merely serves to imprison learners even deeper within the dungeons of castle hegemony. Further, the process of negotiation can only be undertaken authentically after students have been initiated into the ideology critique tradition and been exposed to a variety of alternative philosophical positions. Then, so the argument goes, students can participate in negotiation in an informed way. Hence, a period of instruction in, say, Marcuse or Foucault should precede any negotiation of curriculum. This position finds support in Gramsci's

emphasis on the importance of exposing working class students to a body of theoretical work, through didactic means if necessary. Adult educators holding this position will fight against introducing any negotiation of curriculum too early, arguing that doing this only perpetuates the status quo by allowing students to make uninformed choices that reflect their uncritical acceptance of prevailing ideology. By way of contrast, adult educators working within the constructivist or pragmatist traditions will be much more inclined to move straight to negotiating curriculum and to assume that students' knowledge and teachers' knowledge should be treated with equal seriousness. The emphasis will be on trusting people to decide what's best for them, on privileging people's everyday knowledge and experience. This position views the false consciousness argument as one that proves the arrogance of academics and the unjustified valorization of theory, demonstrating as it does that ideologues always believe that they know what's best for other people.

A second set of related tensions arises from the commitment to democratic, participatory approaches usually associated with criticality. As faculty and students in an adult education doctoral program that espouses negotiation observe, participatory graduate education is often an oxymoron (Avila et. al., 2000). The most democratically well meaning faculty end up requiring rewriting and attendance and, at least initially, retaining curricular control. Two democratic communities emerge – one composed of students and one of faculty—who then engage each other along the lines of a labor-management negotiation. There are also the questions of race, class and gender relations amongst faculty teams. White faculty and males can abandon the trappings of power without losing authority. This is much more difficult for faculty of color and women for whom the struggle to be taken seriously as an authority is not easily forgotten. It has often been pointed out to me by colleagues of color that as a white male I can easily give up power without foregoing privilege. Finally, as Mayo (1999, p. 140) observes, teachers who experiment with democratic approaches are often perceived as less credible by their students who often equate intellectual authority with traditional didactic approaches.

So where does this leave us? An awareness of the epistemological and practical contradictions arising from the contestation of criticality should

help people stay longer with the struggle to work in a critically reflective way. A naïve eclecticism which draws a pinch of criticality from ideology critique here and a soupçon of criticality from constructivism there, and which then combines these unreflectively, will sooner or later lead to a breakdown in communication and goodwill among those involved. It will also result in a loss of hope regarding the possibility of change. Surfacing and acknowledging the contradictions discernible among different traditions of criticality helps us make an informed commitment to working critically without being demoralized when things don't go as planned.

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