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Quest for the Grail? : Searching for Critical Thinking in Adult Education

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Abstract: The concept of critical thinking is explored from the perspective of an adult education graduate student. The paper argues that critical thinking, as presently constituted, lacks both clarity and depth. These problems need to be addressed before critical thinking can become viable and useful.

Locating Myself/Locating “Critical”

Often students are expected by adult education faculty to be critical in their approach to graduate studies. “Critical” is seemingly everywhere – in article titles, papers, books, dissertation abstracts, course syllabi, and so on to the point that ‘critical’ becomes axiomatic. For me, the problem was that the meaning of ‘critical’ seemed to change from syllabus to syllabus and article to article. So the question: What does it mean to be critical? As I read more, the questions shifted: From what theoretical background does this author or instructor come? How does this professor intend for us to be critical? What are we supposed to do with it? Is it worth doing? These difficulties have been haunting me since my first semester as a graduate student, three years ago, and have spurred my subsequent explorations. At first it was very much a matter of survival. I believed that to be successful in graduate school one must be critical. A second criterion for success is determining what sort of critical a given professor values and working in that mold. But how could something so important be so nebulous? How could no one really tell me what it meant to be critical or why it was necessary? Why weren’t my fellow students worried about it?

At my first Adult Education Research Conference I began to ask conference participants what critical meant, and received rolls of the eyes along with an impatient air of, “Oh, not that tired old thing. Let’s talk about something interesting.” One person even told me that critical thinking could not be defined because its meaning is unique for everyone. I considered for a while that perhaps critical thinking was a fad, that it was a concept with no real significance, a piece to play with in “buzzword bingo”. I kept plugging away, however. I came to believe that there had to be something to the concept -- I couldn’t let it go. Moreover, I began to wonder if the problem with critical thinking had less to do with my lack of understanding and more to do with the incoherence of theoretical underpinnings informing its use. I valued the concept; I wanted to understand it, to give it depth, to be able to articulate a position and choose my practice based on this understanding...and thus my master’s thesis was born (along with my second child). I cannot say that the thesis was a resounding success in doing all that I wanted to do, but it gave me some direction, helped me to understand some of the meanings and the tensions involved in the combination of critical thinking with adult education. It is this discussion, the discussion of meanings, tensions, inconsistencies, and potentials that I wish to explore further.

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature on critical thinking. A more complete review can be found in my M.Ed. thesis (Boxler, 2001). What I will highlight is a discussion of some of the tensions underlying the assumptions of critical thinking. As such, this paper should be seen as a beginning exploration rather than conclusive argument.

Positionality in Critical Thinking: Individual Empowerment and Social Change

My review suggests that two indistinct camps emerge from the literature: Those who seek individual empowerment through critical thinking and those who wish to inculcate critical thinking as a social responsibility. Those focusing on the individual tend to treat critical thinking as an end, with clearly identifiable goals, standards, and processes learners must use. Richard Paul's work exemplifies this view. Critical thinking is a general skill, not context-specific. In Paul's view critical thinking is "a systematic way to form and shape one's thinking... It is thought that is disciplined, comprehensive, based on intellectual standards, and as a result, well-reasoned" (Paul & Willson, 1993, p. 20). He distinguishes between someone who thinks critically in the "weak sense" as described above and someone who thinks critically in the "strong sense," which is much more context specific. According to Paul, someone who has mastered the logic or the basic skills of critical thinking is a weak sense critical thinker until she desires and has the ability to move beyond herself to see the bigger picture, therefore becoming a "strong sense" critical thinker. The strong sense critical thinker recognizes that "muddy" problems dominate in our world, and therefore must be able to cope with problems without retreating into an egocentric or ethnocentric shell (1993a, p. 205-209). Paul describes

the basic drives and abilities of what I call *strong sense* critical thinking: a) an ability to question deeply one's own framework of thought, b) an ability to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one's own, and c) an ability to reason dialectically (multilogically) to determine when one's own point of view is weakest and when an opposing point of view is strongest. (p. 206, italics in original)

Brookfield (1987), falling in line with Paul's strong sense critical thinking, believes it is necessary for adults to live intelligently and responsibly in a democratic society. He argues that critically aware populations are more likely to participate in the formation of their political and social contexts than those who feel distanced. By "distanced" we mean those who choose not to participate in the aforementioned activities, possibly due to mass representation and significant sociopolitical decisions being made far away by a small power elite. Critical thinking is necessary if seemingly unempowered masses are to turn away from their self-absorbed private lives to become socially concerned and active (p. 52-56). In spite of this language and rhetoric, Brookfield's work is targeted toward individual change. He delineates steps and processes, describes the process for an individual, and essentially is hoping that an individual who masters the processes will be willing and able to contribute to social change.

Jack Mezirow's transformation theory attempts to make sense of problem solving when the problems are ill-structured and grounded in life experience (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow offers this definition:

Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based upon the new perspective, and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one's life." (1991, p. 161)

It becomes clear that Mezirow is quite close to the traditional idea of rationality, which uses evidence and logical reasoning to determine a course of progress. While he makes use of Habermas' theory of communicative learning, one sees little or none of central social responsibility/action concepts in Mezirow's theory of transformation. As Cunningham noted, Mezirow "explicitly separates personal transformation from social transformation" (1993, p. 10).

Thinking critically as a social responsibility is an entirely different matter. From this perspective, critical thinking is a process one uses within the larger practice of ideology critique. Critical thinking is merely a tool (albeit a crucial, valuable tool) one uses to identify, uproot, and prevent oppressive practices. Michael Newman (1994, 1999), an exemplar of the social responsibility approach to critical thinking, discusses critical social theory and the hope it offers:

Critical theory is concerned with far more than analysis or logical thinking. It recognizes the influence of cultural values on people's reasoning and acting, and takes into account interaction, insight, feeling, intuition and other non-scientific ways of knowing. Critical theory envisages forms of thinking in which people not only perceive the world more clearly but also perceive their perceptions of the world. (1994, p. 44)

In order for social change to occur, however, people need to be critical thinkers. A critical thinker is one who takes responsibility for both words and actions, is open and clear about values, assumptions, and ideology. A critical thinker is not only critical in thought, but also in the necessary component of action (Newman, 1999). Newman's quote can be seen as a statement of the influence of critical social theory on Brookfield and Mezirow; the main difference between the two camps is scope. Brookfield and Mezirow focus largely on the individual, teaching skills that may help a person know more about herself and her culture. Hopefully, the ensuing awareness of self-situatedness in society will turn the individual away from looking inward to becoming more involved in the creation of her own life and culture. Newman dismisses this approach as entirely too conservative (1994).

The line between critical thinking and critical theory becomes unclear, and sometimes Newman seems to treat them as identical concepts. However, on closer inspection, one can see that critical thinking and critical social theory are not identical. Critical thinking is a main tool that one must develop and use to enact social change. Remove the critical thinking tool and social change is no longer possible. Newman indicates clearly that one should think critically for a specific purpose, using that ability as necessary to fight oppression.

Airing the Issues

Broadly speaking, it seems to me that in much of the adult education literature the language of social responsibility is employed but the models used are individualistic versions of critical thinking. The authors seeking improvement primarily for the individual tend to treat critical thinking as an end in itself, with clearly identifiable goals, standards, and processes learners must use. The social change advocates treat critical thinking as a process one uses within a larger process of ideological critique. Critical thinking is emphasized but not dissected.

Brookfield and Mezirow, however, attempt to use critical social theory as a main theoretical source from which they construct their notions of critical thinking. In doing so, they remove critical thinking as a means to an end (social change) and make it into an end. When one

removes critical thinking from the social change approach, one is redirected toward an individual change approach. It seems that Brookfield and Mezirow would like people to pursue social change, and hope that learners will voluntarily move from an individual to a social change model. The probability of such a move seems small. If a learner is comfortable with the individual change approach, what will cause her to desire social change? Mezirow states, in the tenth step of his transformation process, that the learner needs to reintegrate with her pre-transformation life (1991, p. 160). How does reintegration lead to social change? Reconstruction might lead to the desired change, but not reintegration.

It seems that the move from a social change approach to an individual change approach represents a case where authors use critical social theory while simultaneously ignoring the purpose for which Habermas and other critical social theorists envisioned critical thinking. Diverting critical thinking to an individual change model may in fact stunt the social change process. Once the learner has achieved personal change and growth, she will feel that she reached her goal. There is no impetus to critique and bring change to the larger social order. There is no impetus to work with others in achieving common visions or goals. Individuality is stressed at the expense of the greater social order.

Why, indeed, would adult education work so hard to find a place in the critical thinking movement? One possible reason is that critical thinking may address a problem that appears to obsess adult and other educators: power and control (see, for example, Apps, 1991; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Ruggiero, 1988, Askay, 1997). Authors on critical thinking are suggesting that if we think critically, we cannot be fooled, thus enabling us to choose our courses. This may be so. The word “control” seems to imply that not being fooled also means that we will have *courage* to act on our knowledge; take this a bit further and we see it is also assumed that we have the *desire* to act on our knowledge, and *faith* that we may in some way alter the balance of power to take the aforementioned actions. That is a lot of assuming to come from merely having a critical mindset.

I do not accept “control” as a good reason to practice critical thinking in adult education at any level. What types of control, to what extent a thinker may be in control, and limitations of critical thinking in this arena are not addressed. Greater awareness does open up the thinker’s horizons and acceptance of new possibilities, but to what extent? Democracy is often mentioned as a reason to promote critical thinking. There are control issues in that term as well, but let’s ignore them for now. Why is democracy best for everyone? How do we even know it’s best when we (at least in the US and the UK) don’t practice true democracy? I think it may be safer to say that critical thinking is an effort to stave off ignorance. In our information society, ignorance is abhorrent and sometimes dangerous. Those who are not ignorant are less likely to accept glib slogans, catchy ads, and slick assurances.

Critical thinking in the broader sense has a distinct method, philosophy, and identity. Critical thinking in adult education is a hybrid, related to but not sporting all the necessary characteristics that makes thinking critical instead of ordinary. Further, adult education (as well as much of the rest of the critical thinking movement) assumes that rationality is the best way of thinking and knowing. We adopt criticality because we are of the centuries-old Western rational tradition. We have faith in it. Legitimacy is also an issue for our field: If you want someone to take you seriously, you use and teach reason – so therefore it seems likely that adult education has assimilated rationality to improve its image and acceptance. Rationality is frequently associated with the notion of objectivity – and raises the picture of a cold, detached academic studying life under a microscope. Adult education fosters a socially conscious, caring image, and

therefore the traditional “academic persona” does not suit. To get around this problem we instead use “sense” to be critical in our vague, unstructured manner. Since our thinking is not disciplined, there is no need to examine its structure for strength and stability using a set of standards. It seems fairly clear that adult education courts but does not truly adopt historical criticality.

Brookfield states that he is not following traditional critical thinking paths (Brookfield, 1993). He is instead attempting to develop a method tailored to the needs and purposes of adult education. There is not a universal definition of critical thinking for adult education. While this is not of itself a problem, there does need to be a stronger sense of the nature and practice of critical thinking in adult education, that it is different from the larger tradition, and in what ways. Evaluating thinking is essential here because we have a new practice, and we need to know how well it works... or does not.

Teaching critical thinking in adult education is problematic. I find it difficult to believe that students can become truly critical thinkers if their teachers/professors are unaware of its nature and practice. Robert Sternberg (1985) points out problems with teaching critical thinking that I found completely plausible based on my experience as a graduate student in adult education. We are taught, for example, that many problems faced by adults in life are ill defined, located in a dynamic context and fraught with power relationships. We are taught less about how to structure the problems; how to identify worthwhile problems; and how to think critically (and constructively) in conjunction with other people. If, as Chaffee (Esterle & Clurman, 1993) suggests, there are other ways of thinking and knowing, should we not also become familiar with them as alternatives? Askay addresses this point when he points out that we “preserve the analytic perspective [by] our Western insistence upon a bifurcation between rationality and alternative ways of thinking. The first receives uncritical acclaim, while the latter is excluded, suspected, or extinguished.” (1997)

Bearing these considerations in mind, consider how many authors cite Brookfield and Mezirow on a regular basis. Both are very influential in adult education. I suspect that many adult educators simply have not thought about critical thinking much beyond Brookfield’s and Mezirow’s work. Their scholarship, motives, and aims are frequently accepted without serious question. Critical thinking is, ironically, accepted without serious question. It is time to start asking ourselves better questions about how we think so we know why we think the way we do, its advantages and disadvantages.

Conclusion

In the case of graduate students, critical thinking will allow us to sort through the plethora of literature in adult education and identify that which is quality from the dusty chaff. Good critical thinking will enhance our scholarly efforts as well as our daily lives. Maybe, just maybe, we can use it to help improve the human condition. However, I think exposure to other thinking traditions (see Askay, 1997) would benefit scholars (and probably others). Promoting critical thinking without exploring alternatives is problematic. Adult educators need to shake off our collective complacency. In terms of critical thinking and even -- dare I say it? -- thought in general, adult education as a field needs to reflect, to cultivate awareness and then take appropriate, deliberate action to direct its course.

This last point will probably come as resounding a lack of surprise to most readers. My study demonstrates that confusion such as that which I described is justified. To initiate such as myself the literature is confusing and confused. The term, the concept and the practice of critical

thinking are an integral part of today's academe – what professor is going to knowingly take an uncritical position when teaching? What student will be applauded for writing or reading uncritically? However, critical thinking is being cast off from its theoretical moorings; if critical thinking is the academic equivalent to the rudder of a ship, we are quickly becoming lost in a sea of equivocation. If critical thinking is indispensable to the theory and practice of adult education -- as most authors imply -- a lot more attention needs to be paid to its theoretical underpinnings and the congruence between professed, implied and operational usage.

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