

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

---

## Living a Critical Life through Authenticity

Patricia Cranton

*St. Francis Xavier University, Canada*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cranton, Patricia (2005). "Living a Critical Life through Authenticity," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/51>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# **Living a Critical Life through Authenticity**

Patricia Cranton

St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

**Abstract:** *Based on a three-year study of how educators develop authenticity in their teaching, I explore one facet of authenticity, that of critical reflection. As teachers gain experience, they move from critical reflection on the specific skills and techniques of teaching to questioning the premises of their practice and the nature of the educational system.*

## **Purpose of the Study**

It was my intent in this study to explore how educators develop authenticity in their teaching over time and with experience and to relate this developmental process to critical reflection or “living a critical life.” Professional development for educators is a neglected facet of adult education; that is, what we have learned in adult education is not applied as often as it could be to professional development practice. The professional development literature tends to focus on the skills acquisition rather than a deeper exploration of the meaning of practice and how individuals bring their sense of self into their work as teachers. Although the concept of authenticity appears briefly in both the scholarly literature and in guides for practitioners, prior to this study, it had not been investigated empirically.

In recent years, I have been working to link concepts from transformative learning theory, Jung’s notion of individuation, and the development of authenticity (Cranton & Roy, 2003). I see transformative learning and individuation as leading to authenticity. In this research, I investigate how these developmental processes manifest themselves in teaching.

## **Perspective**

Since we used a grounded theory methodology, the theoretical framework emerged only as we interpreted the results of the study. Therefore, I present the theoretical framework following the methodology and results.

## **Methodology**

Grounded theory was selected as an appropriate methodology given that there is little theoretical work related to the development of authenticity. Grounded theory research uses inductive fieldwork rather than deductive approaches and the primary outcome is a set of categories along with a description of the properties of those categories. Tentative hypotheses are then formulated regarding the relationships among categories and properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tesch, 1990).

Twenty-two faculty members from three university campuses in the Maritime provinces of Canada participated in the study over three years. Participants came from a wide variety of disciplines: business, philosophy, computer science, education, forestry, kinesiology, nursing, English, biology, psychology, botany, classics, and economics. There were 13 women and 9 men; seven participants were new faculty in their first or second year of teaching, and 15 were experienced teachers.

Our inquiry team consisted of three adult educators and three graduate student assistants. We interviewed each participant once per academic term for the first two years (a total of four interviews) and conducted at least one observation of teaching per year. In the

third year, we brought tentative results back to faculty and held focus group discussions.

Interview and observation data were interpreted using the constant comparative method commended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). We continued to collapse categories to reach a higher level of abstraction but still maintain groupings that would be practical and meaningful for educators.

### Findings

We found five themes that comprehensively described authenticity as seen by the research participants: self-awareness, awareness of the characteristics of learners, relationship with learners, awareness of the influence of context, and critical reflection on each of these four facets of practice. Using a combination of a longitudinal interpretation (over the three years) and a comparison of inexperienced and experienced educators, we were able to construct a four-stage developmental model for each of the five facets of authenticity. These results are reported elsewhere (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

In this paper, I focus on the nature of criticality in understanding and developing authenticity. Critical self-reflection and critical reflection formed a general framework for the development of authenticity. Participants moved from a concrete black-and-white style of reflection on the details of their practice through to a complex, ambiguous critical analysis of the social expectations of their institutions and the larger community regarding the meaning of teaching and learning. Sociocultural distortions in educational systems were probed, especially in our conversations with senior and experienced faculty members. The potential for social transformation was clear.

We were able to develop a four stage developmental continuum of criticality in relation to becoming more authentic in teaching. At the first stage, which we called *beginning authenticity*, faculty engaged in critical reflection on specific teaching skills. They asked, for example, “Am I talking too fast?” “How can I get students to write better essays?” and “How can I improve attendance in my lectures?” When we observed their classrooms, the educators would ask us for feedback on the techniques of their teaching—their use of Powerpoint or their skill at responding to questions. A quote from a participant illustrates this:

*I still find more disappointing term papers than I would like, and that may be unavoidable, you know, you do your best. What I've recently started doing is have them write outlines for me, that's the only way I could think of.*

At the second stage of development, we saw a subtle shift to critical reflection and critical self-reflection on teaching in a more general way (as opposed to examining specific skills and techniques as in the first stage). They were asking themselves, “How did my class go?” “How can I make my teaching better?” and “How am I growing as a teacher?” Here too, there was the beginning of a tendency to question departmental or institutional norms related to teaching. People wondered about the grading policies, grading on a curve, the use of student ratings to judge the quality of teaching, and the integration of field work and lectures. One participant says:

*I would like to think that I'm always evolving and creating something new. So I think I want to constantly evolve and re-evaluate, and be flexible, but I'm not saying that I always am.*

At the third stage, critical reflection became even more general, focusing on broader issues than the classroom or departmental policies. Participants engaged in questioning of this research project, their perceptions of themselves as authentic, and the higher education

system in general. They asked, “What does authenticity mean?” “How did I come to see teaching in this way?” “Am I authentic?” and “What can I do to change the system?” Here is one educator struggling with authenticity:

*It [authenticity], what I want to say is that it is me as a teacher. Me as a teacher, and not somebody else as a teacher. But then I guess the follow up question to that would be, ‘well then who else would it be if it wasn’t you?’ ... I love working with students. And it is trying to bring all that to them. And that’s pretty vague.*

At the fourth stage, which we called *mature authenticity*, faculty members were questioning the premises of their underlying conceptualization of self, other, relationships, and context. Mezirow (1991) sees premise reflection as being the most likely type of reflection to lead to transformative learning. We felt, and our research participants similarly felt that they were engaging in transformative learning about teaching. They asked “Why is it important to be authentic?” “What difference does what I do make?” “Why should I care what students think of me as a person?” In this illustrative quote, an experienced science faculty member reflects on the meaning of good teaching:

*And now, I just sort of find this whole thing bizarre because I’m not sure what people think a good teacher is, but I’m constantly being treated, in this setting, as if I know something about teaching, and I really don’t. I mean, my definition is, if I’m a good teacher, my students go away feeling inspired and wanting to learn more without me. I mean, that would be my definition.*

It makes sense that new teachers concern themselves with the techniques of teaching. Faculty members, unlike school teachers, have little or no preparation for the educator role. The first thing they need to do is to become a member of the collective of university teachers and acquire the skills that go with that position. It is only over time and with experience that they are then able to decide how they are different from and also the same as that collective. At this point, they consider who they are as a person, how their values and beliefs are a part of the social world of academia or not a part, and define themselves in relation to that social world. Rather than adopting the persona of professor, they find an authentic way of living within that role. They live a critical life as a teacher. They question rather than run with the herd. In transformative learning language, faculty members who come to this stage of development have developed habits of mind that are more open, permeable, and better justified. In the language of individuation, they have differentiated their sense of self from the collective. And in terms of authenticity, they have come to be able to express their genuine self in their community of practice.

I do not intend to imply that new educators are inauthentic or that all experienced educators become authentic. The participants in this study were selected based on their interest in authenticity in teaching and recommendations from colleagues who saw them as authentic. We cannot conclude that authenticity automatically develops with experience, but we can conclude that, for those people who strive for authenticity, it is a journey that takes place over time and shows itself in the complexity of their criticality.

### **Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature**

The value placed on reflection about teaching is apparent in the literature (Brookfield, 1995) even though it is not necessarily as recognized in professional development practice. Critical reflection is the central process in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000, 2003), and it is likely that much of our important learning about teaching is transformative in nature

(Cranton, 1996). Transformative learning is a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated (Mezirow, 2000).

Jarvis (1992) proposes that authenticity is linked with reflective learning. People need to develop as autonomous and rational individuals within their social context. When people's actions are "controlled by others and their performance is repetitive and ritualistic" (pp. 115-116), they are inauthentic. Heidegger (1962) sees authenticity as involving critical participation in life. We question how we are different from the community and live accordingly; we do not do something just because it is the way others behave or believe what others believe without considering whether it is true for us. This is a good way of understanding authenticity—we need to know who we are and what we believe and then act on that. However, this does not mean that we make such decisions in isolation. Authenticity involves knowing and understanding the collective and carefully, critically determining how we are different from and the same as that collective. Sharp (1995) suggests the first fruit of consciously developing as an authentic person is the "segregation of the individual from the undifferentiated and unconscious herd" (p. 48). Thinking along parallel lines, Freire (1972) argues that authenticity comes through having a critical knowledge of the context within which we work and seeing the principal contradictions of that society. To be authentic, the educator is bold, and dares to take risks.

When faculty are focused on concrete rules about teaching, or when they are acting from a teaching persona and have socially constructed views about the roles of teacher and student, critical reflection is focused on those perspectives. As the foundations for practice become more complex and as the sense of Self becomes better integrated into teaching, reflection becomes more complex as well. When people start critically questioning why they are living and teaching by rules, they have moved into premise reflection, or as Brookfield (2005) suggests, ideology critique. Transformative learning is possible, the openness and complexity of perspectives increases, and authenticity develops.

With each step of the journey, an individual becomes more aware of who he or she is as apart from the collective, uncritically assimilated whole of humanity. According to transformative learning theory, we become more open to alternatives as we root out the habits of mind we have acquired in our past, and our views of the world become more open and better justified. In the process of individuation, we separate ourselves from the herd—we come to know how we are different from and simultaneously the same as others.

### **Discussion**

As adult educators, we pay a lot of attention to encouraging our students to engage in the traditions of criticality: ideology critique (ways in which people recognize uncritically assimilated and unjust dominant ideologies or socio-cultural distortions); the identification of psycho-cultural assumptions that constrain how we see ourselves and our relationships; analytic philosophy and logic through which we become more skilful in argument analysis; and pragmatic constructivism by which people construct and deconstruct their experiences and meanings (Brookfield, 2005). Less often do we turn that lens onto our own learning about our practice. Professional development activities for educators tend to focus on the acquisition and improvement of teaching skills and, as important as this is, it does not take us far enough. We are left with the impression that if we can put together a good "toolkit" and polish our presentation style, we will have become good teachers.

Teaching is about communicating with people in a way that fosters their learning. It is founded on a relationship between educator and learner. Good relationships need authenticity. In order to become authentic, educators need to have a strong sense of self, bring that self into their teaching, and come to realize how and where they differ from their colleagues, their institution, and the cultural expectations about the role of teachers. According to Jung (1961), the individual learns to “stand on his own feet,” and “collective identities such as membership in an organization, support of ‘isms,’ and so on, interfere with the fulfillment of this task” (Jung, 1961, p. 342). The path to separation from collective identities and the rejection of ‘isms’ comes through critical reflection and transformative learning.

This research has strong implications for faculty development, an often neglected area of adult education. The study of authenticity in teaching allows us to move away from the search for standardized principles of effective practice and, instead, turn inward and examine how it is that educators, as social human beings and individuals, can develop their own way in the world of teaching. Framing the development of authenticity in terms of ideology critique helps us to become aware of how the educational system shapes educators, often without our knowledge, and imposes assumptions that maintain that system.

### References

- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (1996). *Professional development as transformative learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P., & Carusetta, E. (2004). Perspectives on authenticity in teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(1), 5-22.
- Cranton, P. & Roy, M. (2003). When the bottom falls out of the bucket: A holistic perspective on transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education* 1(2), 86-98.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (Translated by J. MacQuarrie & E. Robinson) San Francisco: Harper.
- Jarvis, P. (1992). *Paradoxes of learning: On becoming an individual in society*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jung, C. (1961). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58-63.
- Sharp, D. (1995). *Who am I really? Personality, soul and individuation*. Toronto: Inner City Books.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. New York: Falmer.