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Recommended Citation

Raiskums, Bernadine W. (2010). "Critical Philosophical Concept Analysis A Search for Meaning of the Concept Criticality in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/64>

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Critical Philosophical Concept Analysis

A Search for Meaning of the Concept *Criticality* in Adult Education

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Abstract: *This study applied philosophical concept analysis as a qualitative research method to study meanings of the concept “criticality” in adult education. The research design combined elements of two previously applied approaches emphasizing comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the literature. Results of this study provide a clear conceptual foundation and working definition for the concept “criticality” that will serve as a heuristic for further research, theory building, and practice.*

Introduction

As adult educators have collaborated in the development of adult education as an academic field of study in the United States, it has come to comprise a conglomeration of principles, theories, concepts, and special purpose language drawn from various other fields including anthropology, health care, philosophy, social justice, and many more. Unlike that of other fields, adult education coursework is generally not offered at the undergraduate level. Individuals coming into adult education graduate courses are generally transitioning from other fields as diverse as business and music. They generally lack formal foundational knowledge in adult education and its peculiar principles, theories, practices, and special purpose language. Even within the field of study and related field of practice, adult education’s diverse special interest groups use unique terms of art, or different meanings for common terms, to enhance their communications. Ironically, use of their own special purpose language may impair communication across the field by either intentionally or inadvertently excluding interested others without the same special interests.

The purpose of this study and presentation is two-fold. The primary purpose is the reintroduction and demonstration of analytic philosophy and philosophical concept analysis as a research approach in the field of adult education. While concept analysis has recently been developed and applied in the fields of nursing education and nursing science, the approach has not been applied in a published adult education dissertation since that of Hanan (1997). The present study offers current theory and guidance for further development and application of the approach in the academic field of adult education.

The second purpose of this study is the provision of a clear conceptual foundation and working definition of *criticality* to serve as a heuristic for further research, theory building, and practice. Elias and Merriam (2005) assert “If we know the essential features of a concept, we will more likely use it in a proper manner and thus avoid conceptual and linguistic confusion” (p. 196). Brookfield (2000) has called for surfacing and acknowledging contradictions in conceptualization of *criticality*; this study begins to answer that call.

Statement of the Problem

The guiding problem for this study is the lack of a common general understanding of some central concepts and terms which have become common currency in the academic field of adult education. The texts seldom present precise stipulative definitions of terms of art, nor do they generally include glossaries. Current specialized dictionaries of adult education terminology are not readily available in text or on the Internet. For these reasons, the peculiar language of adult education may pose significant challenges to newcomers and individuals with other primary interests. As a result, they may be disadvantaged in their interest and efforts to understand, much less enter into, the scholarly discourse of adult education. To paraphrase Brookfield (2000a), individuals already in the field and professing a concern for excluded groups and subjugated discourses may through the use of special language be simultaneously and paradoxically practicing exclusion and subjugation with regard to those seeking entry. Elias and Merriam (2005) assert that conceptual confusion has led to differences of opinion and policy as well as practical difficulties in the field of adult education. Morse (2000) points out that confusion occurs when a number of researchers use a concept label without realizing that they are assigning slightly different meanings to it. Confusion also occurs when a concept label is used by theory builders and practitioners without acknowledging differences in meanings.

For example, in the field of adult education, *criticality* has emerged as a central yet problematic concept. “Research demonstrates that most college faculty lack a substantive concept of critical thinking, though they mistakenly think otherwise” (Paul, 2005, p. 27). This problem has likely been exacerbated by the introduction and popularity of seemingly homonymous and equally vague or ambiguous terms such as *critical awareness*, *critical reflection*, and *critical review*. A number of doctoral dissertations have attempted rather unsuccessfully through various approaches to define the concept *critical thinking*. However, none of those studies has applied philosophical concept analysis as the research method, and none has attempted clarification of the broader concept *criticality*, which has been more recently introduced to the literature by Brookfield (2000b, 2002, 2003).

Rationale – Why Philosophical Concept Analysis?

“If we know the essential features of a concept, we will more likely use it in a proper manner and thus avoid conceptual and linguistic confusion” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 196). Confusion may be mitigated by making a distinction between everyday concepts with dictionary definitions and scientific concepts with operational definitions developed by researchers who designate their attributes in specific contexts (Morse, 2000). “It is important to remember that a concept is not a word, but the idea or characteristics associated with the word” (Rodgers, 2000, p. 85). A concept is not an independent ideal or entity, but is constructed by individuals’ disposition of it, including its use and interpretations. 2000 As disciplinary knowledge increases and becomes more complex, the meanings of central concepts evolve (Rodgers, 2000). In their study of *critical human resource development*, Keefer and Yap (2007) explain that as new frameworks and perspectives are generated, the topic’s maturity and continuing development call for review, critique, and potential reconceptualization.

While quantitative approaches suit studies for purposes of measurement, they do not adequately accommodate studies for purposes of understanding, defining, or explaining conceptualizations. While a number of qualitative approaches have been used to explain concepts associated with criticality, they have not provided a clear conceptual foundation or

working definition of the concept *criticality* as a building block of adult education theory. For example, Vaske (2001) concludes that her qualitative approach to researching adult educators' perceptions of critical thinking produced more questions than answers. Similarly, Raterink (2005) concludes that limitations of her qualitative approach was hampered by inconsistencies among participants' abilities to identify and communicate their interpretations of critical thinking.

The theoretical framework for this study represents a significant break from older, more traditional philosophies in that it emphasizes analysis of concepts rather than synthesis of beliefs (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Analytic philosophy also differs from the postmodern tradition, in that it focuses on linguistic analysis for clarification of vague and ambiguous language rather than attempting to view language nuances through a lens of critical theory. Qualitative philosophical concept analysis, or conceptual analysis, represents an application of analytic philosophy that seeks "to clarify the language used in education" (Guttek, 2004, p. 113). Its focus on learning through clarification of language in ordinary communication, includes special purpose languages ordinarily used in specialized learning communities. Concept analysis has been found to be an effective postpositivist approach to problems of identifying how concepts are understood in education and is covered extensively by contributors to *Concept Development in Nursing: Foundations, Techniques, and Applications* (Rodgers & Knafl, 1993, 2000).

Rationale – Why *Criticality*?

Criticality came to be the concept of interest for this study based upon two observations. First, an analysis of the concept *criticality* could consider similarities and differences among conceptualizations of the broader term as well as collocations of the term *critical* and other associate expressions such as *critic* and *critique*. Second Brookfield's (2000b) call for surfacing and acknowledging contradictions in conceptualization of *criticality* has not received adequate response. This study, aimed to provide an adequate response by building upon the knowledge that has emerged from previous studies of collocations of the term *critical* and associate expressions.

Research Questions

For this study, the basic research question was: "How is criticality conceptualized in the scholarly literature of adult education?" Eight questions were designed to support the basic research question in order to assess the maturity (level of development), physiology (use), and anatomy (structure or definition), of the concept *criticality* in accordance with guidance from Morse (2000) and Rodgers (2000).

1. What is the maturity level of the concept *criticality* in the literature of adult education?
2. What meaning senses or aspects are attributed to the concept *criticality*?
3. What essential characteristics are generally attributed to the concept *criticality*?
4. What preconditions are attributed to the concept *criticality*?
5. What are the boundaries attributed to the concept *criticality*?
6. What are the outcomes attributed to the concept *criticality*?
7. What working definition of the concept *criticality* emerges from the analysis?

8. What is the pragmatic utility of the concept *criticality* to the research, theory, and practice of adult education?

As predicted by Morse (2000), specific analytical questions emerged during the iterative process of data collection and analysis to further guide the study. Also, as predicted, the seven analytical questions that emerged contributed to the understanding required for most appropriate responses to the basic research question and supporting questions.

1. Is criticality conceptualized consistently in the scholarly literature across the field of adult education?
2. Do the meaning senses or aspects attributed to the concept *criticality* vary depending upon the philosophical frame in which the literature is situated?
3. Do the essential characteristics generally attributed to manifestation of the concept *criticality* vary depending upon the philosophical frame in which the literature is situated?
4. Do the preconditions attributed to the concept *criticality* vary depending upon the philosophical frame in which the literature is situated?
5. Do the boundaries attributed to the concept *criticality* vary depending upon the philosophical frame in which it is situated?
6. Do the outcomes attributed to manifestation of the concept *criticality* vary depending upon the philosophical frame in which the literature is situated?
7. Are there variations in degrees of *criticality*?

Nature of the Study

Qualitative or interpretive research is most valuable when the purpose of the research is to discover, investigate, and interpret themes and relationships of immediate and local meanings rather than to generalize findings. Accordingly, the focus of qualitative research is on phenomena rather than population samples; the data analysis employs analytic induction rather than deductive; and the presentation is primarily narrative rather than statistical. In a qualitative study, the research focus tends to sharpen “and methods tend to evolve as understanding of the research context deepens” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 9). According to Gall, Gall, & Borg, (2003), “...it is not necessary to adhere to any particular tradition in doing qualitative research” (p. 435). Nevertheless, the methodology of this study formally combines elements of two recognized approaches to philosophical concept analysis within the tradition of analytic philosophy.

Application of concept analysis, or conceptual analysis, to educational concepts since it was advocated by Scheffler (1958, 1960/1978). It has been applied as an approach or method in adult education doctoral research since the 1970s, beginning with Snyder’s (1970) analysis of the concept *involvement* in adult education. Some approaches have been highly structured, while others have not. Lindeman (1926/1989), Paterson (1979), and Stubblefield (1992) applied less-structurally defined, yet quite rigorous, approaches to their analyses of the concept *adult education*. Similarly, Monette (1977/1995) applied a less-structurally defined analysis to the concept *educational need* and Mezirow (1998) to the concept *critical reflection*. Doctoral dissertation studies have applied a variety of approaches, from highly structured to lacking any apparent structure for analysis of the concepts *community health* (Baisch, 2006), *critical thinking* (Streib, 1992), *ethical sensitivity* (Weaver, 2005) *experience* (Hanan, 1997), *fidelity* (Noland, 1991), *involvement* (Snyder, 1970), *lifelong education* (Wilson, 1987), *oral language* (Moore,

2006) *program* (Schwartz, 1971), *resilience* (Alden, 2002), and *satisfaction* (McDougald, 1984). These dissertations demonstrate Elias and Merriam's (2005) assertion that value-free analyses are most common, although some analyses lead to normative prescriptive recommendations. This study aimed to apply a value-free conceptual analysis to the concept *criticality*.

The method for this study was designed to systematically evaluate the concept's level of maturity and pragmatic utility, to clarify the concept, and to identify a working definition of the term *criticality* as a heuristic for further pragmatic research, theory- building, and practice. The design combined elements of Rodgers' (2000) evolutionary method and Morse's (2000) criterion-based method. Rodgers' approach emphasizes inductive inquiry and rigorous analysis of how the concept is used in specific contexts to serve as a *heuristic* "that can be applied and tested as another phase in the continuing cycle of concept evaluation and development...its contribution to the discipline assessed and expanded" (p. 84). Morse's approach emphasizes the necessity for a survey and content analysis in a preliminary literature review to account for *all* of the relevant scholarly literature and to evaluate the maturity of the concept. Evaluation of a concept's maturity must precede and provide a path for further inquiry, according to Morse, Mitcham, Hupcey, and Tasón (1996). Lack of a literature base addressing the concept indicates that it is "immature," lacking pragmatic utility and requiring further study through qualitative inquiry. A limited literature base indicates that it is "emerging" and may require further study through concept analysis to enhance its pragmatic utility. A more comprehensive literature base indicates that the concept may be "mature" and ready for study and further development through quantitative research to maximize its pragmatic utility. Based upon these criteria, findings from the literature review supported an evaluation of *criticality* as an emerging concept with an adequate literature base to support a concept analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, Raiskums combined seven elements of Rodgers' (2000) and Morse's (2000) methods of concept analysis into a single comprehensive approach to rigorous data collection and analysis. The seven principles and activities are presented here with the results.

1. Identify the concept of interest and associate expressions. The concept *criticality* came to be positioned as the concept of interest for this study
2. Be clear about the purpose of the inquiry. The purpose of this study was to address the problem that it was not known how, and to what extent, the concept *criticality*, as intended by use of the term and common associate expressions, was understood in the field of adult education.
3. Ensure validity (by searching all relevant data bases, obtaining the full-text of all references, and developing a system for maintaining bibliographic records). A purposive sampling strategy was followed in a search of Sage Education database, Academic Search Premier database, and Adult Education Research Conference proceedings database. From content analysis of the literature, a total of 131 scholarly articles and papers published in the past ten years were confirmed to be relevant and appropriate for this study. Manual search and content analysis of works referenced in the 131 articles and papers yielded 29 additional articles and papers that were confirmed to be relevant and appropriate for the study.

4. Identify significant analytical questions that emerge and can be directed back to the literature to support the research question. Seven analytical questions were identified and directed back to the literature to support the research question.
5. Synthesize results. All of the 160 articles and papers that had been identified were rigorously analyzed and coded in a concurrent iterative process. Results were synthesized through the continual review and reassessment of data coding.
6. Identify an exemplar (or working definition) of the concept, if appropriate. The following definition emerged from the data collection, analysis, and synthesis: “The concept *criticality*, in the field of adult education, is understood to be a disposition for purposeful thinking and acting guided by criteria that are considered to be contextually appropriate and that are expected to result in positive outcomes [as related to the purpose]” (Raiskums, 2008).
7. Identify implications, hypotheses, and implications for further development of the concept. The researcher found that lack of clarity and inconsistency of use of the term *criticality* are due in part to the dual nature of its use in ordinary English. One sense of the term *critical* means crucial or related to core criteria and a second sense means discerning judgment based upon core criteria (Paul & Elder, 2007). Substituting a surrogate term such as *crucial* or *important* whenever that sort of meaning sense is intended is one way to improve clarity and precision in communication. Confusion and ambiguity are also due in part to authors of literature situated in one philosophical frame neglecting to acknowledge authors of literature situated in other philosophical frames. Through this study, of the literature across the field of adult education, the level of maturity and pragmatic utility of the concept *criticality* have been advanced by the laying out of a clear conceptual foundation and the emergence of a clear working definition to serve as a heuristic for further development of the concept.

Note that the response to procedural question #6 above also responds to the basic research question. In addition, results of the data collection and analysis yielded responses to the eight questions that supported the basic research question as well as to the seven analytical questions that emerged.

Recommendations for Future Study

The primary recommendation emerging from this study is that concept analysis be considered as a research methodology whenever it can contribute to the development cycle of any concept with emerging maturity and centrality to the field of adult education. While the present study has bridged philosophical frames, it has also clearly summarized conceptualization of criticality within three frames, providing foundational clarity and strength for additional study within each frame. Specifically, additional research and development of understanding of the concept *criticality* within the Africentric philosophical frame of Africentrism is recommended for direct furtherance of African American interests and for indirect furtherance of interests of other cultures with values that differ from those with Eurocentric roots. Similarly, research and development is also recommended within philosophical frames of America’s First Nations and other subsistence cultures. Such research might follow models developed for understanding within the Africentric frame or a model similar to that developed by Kapoor (2003) in an attempt to extend the theoretical and practical scope of critical adult education to Adivasi social

struggles/movements in the Indian context. Concept analysis can be applied in shorter studies such as Cuban's (2005) exploration of the concept *functional health literacy*. Timely publishing of results of shorter studies can contribute to the pragmatic utility of any number of concepts to the research, theory building, and practice of adult education.

A second recommendation is that future studies build upon the foundation laid in this study for understanding the concept *criticality*. For example, Brookfield (2002) calls for adult educators to reexamine predominant praxis regarding criticality, and Taylor (2006) suggests that research is needed to better understand different types of critical reflection. The results of this study provide a tool for engagement in such reexamination and research. In addition, as pointed out by Mezirow (1998a), "The professional task ahead is to find ways to translate the concept of CRA [critical reflection of assumptions] and discourse into curricula or programs, instructional methods, materials development, and evaluation criteria" (p. 197). The conceptual foundation and working definition that have come out of this study can be employed to translate the concept *criticality* into practice.

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