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The Getting of Wisdom: What Critically Reflective Teaching is and Why It's Important

Stephen Brookfield

From *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995 (Forthcoming)

We teach to change the world. The hope that undergirds our efforts to help students learn is that doing this will help them act towards each other, and to their environment, with compassion, understanding and fairness. But our attempts to increase the amount of love and justice in the world are never simple, never ambiguous. What we think are democratic, respectful ways of treating people can be experienced by them as oppressive and constraining. One of the hardest things teachers learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice. The cultural, psychological and political complexities of learning, and the ways in which power complicates all human relationships (including those between students and teachers) means that teaching can never be innocent.

Teaching innocently means thinking that we're always understanding exactly what it is that we're doing and what effect we're having. Teaching innocently means assuming that the meanings and significance we place in our actions are the ones that students take from them. At best, teaching this way is naive. At worst, it induces pessimism, guilt and lethargy. Since we rarely have full awareness of what we're doing, and since we frequently misread how others perceive our actions, an uncritical stance towards our practice sets us up for a lifetime of frustration. Nothing seems to work out as it should. Our inability to control what looks like chaos becomes, to our eyes, evidence of our incompetence.

Breaking this vicious circle of innocence and blame is one reason why the habit of critical reflection is crucial for teachers' survival. Without a critically reflective stance towards what we do we tend to accept the blame for problems that are not of our own making. We think that all resistance to learning displayed by students is caused by our own insensitivity or unpreparedness. We read poor evaluations of our teaching (often written by only a small minority of our students) and immediately conclude that we are hopeless failures. We become depressed when ways of behaving towards students and colleagues that we think are democratic and respectful are interpreted as aloof or manipulative. A critically reflective stance towards our teaching helps us avoid these traps of demoralization and self-laceration. It might not win us easy promotion or bring us lots of friends. But it does increase enormously the chances that we will survive in the classroom with enough energy and sense of purpose to have some real effect on those we teach.

Understanding Reflection as Hunting Assumptions

Critical reflection is one particular aspect of the larger process of reflection. To understand critical reflection properly we need first to know something about the reflective process in general. The most distinctive feature of the reflective process is its focus on hunting assumptions.

Assumptions are the taken for granted beliefs about the world, and our place within it, that seem so obvious to us as not to need to be stated explicitly. In many ways we *are* our assumptions. Assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. Becoming aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act is one of the most puzzling intellectual challenges we face in our lives. It is also something we instinctively resist, for fear of what we might discover. Who wants to clarify and question assumptions she has lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find out that they don't make sense? What makes the process of assumption hunting particularly complicated is that assumptions are not all of the same character. I find it useful to distinguish between three broad categories of assumptions - paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal.

Paradigmatic assumptions are the hardest of all assumptions to uncover. They are the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories. Usually we don't even recognize them as assumptions, even after they've been pointed out to us. Instead we insist that they're objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts as we know them to be true. Some paradigmatic assumptions I have held at different stages of my life as a teacher are that adults are self-directed learners, that critical thinking is an intellectual function characteristic of adult life, that good adult educational processes are inherently democratic, and that education always has a political dimension. Paradigmatic assumptions are examined critically only after a great deal of resistance to doing this, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged and changed, the consequences for our lives are explosive.

Prescriptive assumptions are assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation. They are the assumptions that are surfaced as we examine how we think teachers should behave, what good educational processes should look like, and what obligations students and teachers owe to each other. Inevitably they are grounded in, and extensions of, our paradigmatic assumptions. For example, if you believe that adults are self-directed learners then you assume that the best teaching is that which encourages students to take control over designing, conducting and evaluating their own learning.

Causal assumptions are assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. They are usually stated in predictive terms. An example of a causal assumption would be that if we use using learning contracts this will increase students' self-directedness. Another would be the assumption that if we make mistakes in front of students this creates a trustful environment for learning in which students feel free to make errors with no fear of censure or embarrassment. Of all the assumptions we hold, causal ones are the easiest to uncover. Most of the reflective exercises described in this book will, if they work well, clarify teachers' causal assumptions. But discovering and investigating these is only the start of the reflective process. We must then try to find a way to work back to the more deeply embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions we hold.

Hunting Assumptions: Some Examples

One way to demonstrate the benefits of the reflective habit is to point out what happens when it is absent. Without this habit we run the continual risk of making poor decisions and bad judgments. We take actions on the basis of assumptions that are unexamined and we believe unquestioningly that others are reading into our actions the meanings that we intend. We fall into the habits of justifying what we do by reference to unchecked 'common sense' and of thinking that the unconfirmed evidence of our own eyes is always accurate and valid. 'Of course we know what's going on in our classrooms' we say to ourselves, 'after all, we've been doing this for years, haven't we?' Yet unexamined common sense is a notoriously unreliable guide to action.

Consider the following examples of how common sense assumptions inform action. All these assumptions and actions are probably familiar to readers, particularly those who see themselves as progressive. After each example of a common sense assumption I give a plausible alternative interpretation that calls its validity into question.

It's common sense to visit small groups after you've set them a task, since this demonstrates your commitment to helping them learn. Visiting groups is an example of respectful, attentive, student-centred teaching.

Visiting students after you've set them a task can seem like a form of assessment - a way of checking up to see whether they're doing what you told them to do. This can come across as insulting to students, since it implies that you don't trust them enough to do what you've asked. Students might change their behavior during your visit to their group as a way of impressing you with the kinds of behaviors they think you want to see. Their overwhelming concern becomes to show you what good, efficient, task-oriented students they are, rather than with thoughtfully analysing and critiquing the task at hand

It's common sense to cut lecturing down to a minimum since lecturing induces passivity in students and kills critical thinking.

Before students can engage critically with ideas and actions they may need a period of assimilation and grounding in a subject area or skill set. Lecturing may be a very effective way of ensuring this. Before students can be expected to think critically they must see this process modelled in front of their eyes. A lecture in which a teacher models a questioning of her own assumptions, a recognition of ethical

dilemmas hidden in her position, an identification of inconvenient theories, facts and philosophies that she has deliberately overlooked, and an openness to considering alternate viewpoints, is the necessary precursor to students doing these same things. Through critically stimulating

lectures a teacher sets a critical tone for learning. By first modeling the process herself, she

lectures a teacher sets a critical tone for learning. By first modeling the process herself, she earns the right to ask students to think critically.

It's common sense to use learning contracts since they are democratic, cooperative forms of assessment that give students a sense of control and independence.

Unless the ground for learning contracts has been well prepared, and a detailed case for them has been built, students may interpret their use as evidence of a teacher's laziness or of a laissez faire, intellectual

relativism. Students can only make informed choices about what they need to know, how they can know it, and how they can know that they know it, on the basis of as full as possible an understanding of the learning terrain they are being asked to explore. Learning contracts should only be used, therefore, when students know the grammar of the activity. They should understand its internal rules for inquiry, the analytical processes it requires, and the criteria used to judge meritorious achievement in the area. Only if they know these can they make informed choices about what and how to learn.

It's common sense that students like group discussion since they feel involved and respected. Discussion methods build upon principles of participatory, active learning.

Democratic discourse is a habit that is rarely learned or practised in daily life. When discussion groups form they reflect power dynamics and communicative inequities in the larger society. They also provide a showcase for egomaniacal

grandstanding. Students will be highly skeptical of group discussion if the teacher has not earned the right to ask students to work this way by first modeling her own commitment to this process. Before asking students to engage in discussion, therefore, teachers must first find a way of demonstrating their own engagement in this activity. One way to do this might be by holding several public discussions with colleagues early on in a course. In these discussions teachers would model respectful disagreement and constructive criticism. Teachers would then work with students to create ground rules for democratic discourse that nullify, as much as possible, the inequities of race, class and gender that are inevitably imported into the group from the wider society.

It's common sense that respectful, empathic teachers will downplay their position of presumed superiority and acknowledge their students as co-teachers

To students who have made great sacrifices to attend an educational activity, a teacher's attempts to deconstruct her authority through avowals of how she'll learn more from the students than they will from her, come across as false modesty. Students know teachers have particular

expertise, experience, skill and knowledge. To pretend otherwise is to insult students' intelligence and to create a note of mistrust from the outset. Students will feel happy with their role as co-teachers only after the teacher's credibility has been established to their satisfaction and after they know what she stands for.

It's common sense that teaching is essentially mysterious, so that if we try to dissect it or understand its essence, we kill it.

Viewing teaching as a process of unfathomable mystery removes the necessity to think about what we do. Any serious inquiry into practice appears as reductionistic and assinine. But the teaching as mystery metaphor can be a convenient shield for incompetence. It excuses teachers from having to answer such basic questions as 'how do you know when you are teaching well?', 'how do you know your students are learning?' and 'how could your practice be made more responsive?' Seeing teaching as mysterious works against the improvement of practice. If good or bad teaching are all a matter of chance then there is no point trying to do better. The teaching as mystery metaphor also closes down the possibility of teachers sharing knowledge, insights, and informal theories of practice since mystery is, by definition, incommunicable.

It's common sense that teachers who have been working the longest have the best instincts about what students want and what approaches work best. If my own instincts as a novice conflict with what experienced teachers tell me is true, I should put these instincts aside and defer to the wisdom of their experience.

Length of experience does not automatically confer insight and wisdom. Ten years of practice can be one year's worth of

distorted experience repeated ten times. The 'experienced' teacher may be caught within self-fulfilling interpretive frameworks that remain closed to any alternative interpretations. Experience that is not subject to critical analysis is an unreliable and sometimes dangerous guide for giving advice. 'Experienced' teachers can collude in promoting a form of groupthink about teaching that serves to distance themselves from students and to bolster their own sense of superiority.

The assumptions outlined above are, in certain situations, entirely valid. Their apparent

The assumptions outlined above are, in certain situations, entirely valid. Their apparent clarity and truth explain why they are so widely accepted. But, as we can see, there are quite plausible alternative interpretations that can be made of each of them. Central to the reflective process is this attempt to see things differently. A reflective teacher seeks to probe beneath the veneer of a common sense reading of experience. She investigates the hidden dimensions to her practice and becomes aware of the omnipresence of power.

So What Makes Reflection Critical ?

One of the consequences of conceptual popularity is an increased malleability of meaning. As interest in reflective practice has widened, so have the interpretations people make of this idea. Smyth (1992) and Zeichner (1994) have both pointed out that the idea becomes meaningless if people use it to describe any teaching they happen to like. In Zeichner's (1994) words, "It has come to the point now where the whole range of beliefs about teaching, learning, schooling, and the social order have become incorporated into the discourse about reflective practice. Everyone, no matter what his or her ideological orientation, has jumped on the bandwagon at this point, and has committed his or her energies to furthering some version of reflective teaching practice" (p. 9).

So reflection is not, by definition, critical. It is quite possible to teach reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of classroom process. For example, we can reflect about the timing of coffee breaks, whether to use blackboards or flip charts, the advantages of using a liquid crystal display panel over previously prepared overheads, or how rigidly we stick to a deadline for the submission of students' assignments. All these decisions rest on assumptions that can be identified and questioned, and all of them can be looked at from different perspectives. But these are not in and of themselves examples of *critical* reflection.

Just because reflection is not critical does not mean it is unimportant or unnecessary. We cannot get through the day without making numerous technical decisions concerning timing and process. These decisions are made rapidly and instinctively. They are also usually made without an awareness of how the apparently isolated and idiosyncratic world of the classroom embodies forces, contradictions and structures of the wider society. Reflection on the timing of breaks would become critical only if the right of teachers and administrators to divide learning up into organizationally manageable periods of time was questioned. Critical reflection on the merits of blackboards, flip charts or liquid crystal display panels would name and investigate educators' and students' unequal access to technology. Reflection about the deadlines for students' submission of papers that led to an investigation and questioning of the sources of authority underlying the establishment of criteria of evaluation would be reflection that was critical.

What is it, then, that makes this kind of reflection critical ? Is it that it is a deeper, more intense and probing form of reflection ? Not necessarily. Critical reflection on experience certainly does tend to lead to the uncovering of paradigmatic, structuring assumptions. But the depth of a reflective effort does not, in and of itself, make it critical. Put briefly, reflection becomes critical when it has two distinctive purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort so many educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but that actually end up working against our own best long term interests - in other words, those that are hegemonic.

Critical Reflection as the Illumination of Power

Becoming aware of how the dynamics of power permeate all educational processes helps us realize that forces present in the wider society always intrude into the classroom. Classrooms are not limpid, tranquil reflective eddies cut off from the river of social, cultural and political life. They are contested arenas - whirlpools containing the contradictory crosscurrents of the struggles for material superiority and ideological legitimacy that exist in the world outside. When we become aware of the pervasive but notice the oppressive dimensions to practices that we had thought were neutral or even benevolent. We start to explore how power *over* learners can become power *with* learners (Kreisberg, 1992). Becoming alert to the oppressive dimensions to our practice (many of which reflect an unquestioned acceptance of values, norms and practices defined for us by someone else) is often the first step in working more democratically and co-operatively with students and colleagues.

Let me give some examples of critical reflection focused on unearthing the ways in which the dynamics of power invade and distort educational processes.

The Circle

No practice is more beloved of progressive educators than that of having students sit in a circle rather than in rows. The circle is seen as a physical manifestation of democracy, a group of peers facing each other as respectful equals. Teachers like the circle because it draws students into conversation and gives everyone a chance to be seen and heard. Doing this respects and affirms the value of students' experiences. It places their voices front and center. In my own teaching, the circle has mostly been an unquestioned given.

However, as Gore (1993) points out, the experience of being in a circle is ambiguous. For

...generally, as some (white) people say, the experience of being in a circle is challenging for students who are confident, loquacious and used to academic culture, the circle holds relatively few terrors. It is an experience that is congenial, authentic and liberating. But for students who are shy, aware of their different skin color, physical appearance or form of dress, unused to intellectual discourse, intimidated by disciplinary jargon and the culture of academe, or conscious of their lack of education, the circle can be a painful and humiliating experience. These students have been stripped of their right to privacy. They have also been denied the chance to check teachers out by watching them closely before deciding whether or not they can be trusted. Trusting teachers is often a necessary precondition to students speaking out. This trust only comes with time as teachers are seen to be consistent, honest and fair. Yet the circle, with its implicit pressure to participate and perform, may preclude the time and opportunity for this trust to develop.

So beneath the circle's democratic veneer there may exist a much more troubling and ambivalent reality. Students in a circle may feel an implicit or explicit pressure from peers and teachers to say something, anything, just to be noticed. Whether or not they feel ready to speak, or whether or not they have anything particular they want to say, becomes irrelevant. The circle can be experienced as mandated disclosure, just as much as it can be a chance for people to speak in an authentic voice. This is not to suggest that we throw the circle out and go back to the dark days of teachers talking uninterruptedly at rows of desks. I continue to use the circle in my own practice. But critical reflection makes me aware of the circle's oppressive potential and reminds me that I must continually research how it is experienced by students.

Teachers at One with Students

Teachers committed to working democratically frequently declare their 'at one-ness' with students. Believing themselves and their students to be moral equals they like to say to them "I'm no different from you so treat me as your equal. Act as if I wasn't a teacher, but a friend. The fact that there's a temporary imbalance between us in terms of how much I know about this subject is really an accident. We're co-learners and co-teachers, you and I". However, culturally learned habits of reliance on, or hostility towards, authority figures (especially those from the dominant culture) cannot so easily be broken.

Like it or not, in the strongly hierarchical culture of higher education, with its power imbalances and its clear demarcation of roles and boundaries, teachers cannot simply wish their influence away. No matter how much they might want it to be otherwise, and no matter how informal, friendly, and sincere towards students they might be in their declarations of "at one-ness", teachers *are* viewed as different, at least initially. A critically aware teacher will reject as naive the assumption that by saying you're the students' friend and equal you thereby become so. Instead, she will research how her actions are perceived by her students and she will try to understand the meaning and symbolic significance they ascribe to the different things she says and does. She will come to realize that any authentic collaboration can only happen after teachers have spent considerable time earning students' trust by acting democratically and respectfully towards them.

The Teacher as Fly on the Wall

Teachers committed to a vision of themselves as non-directive facilitators of learning, or as resource people there only to serve needs defined by students, often adopt the 'fly on the wall' approach to teaching. They will put students into groups, give only minimal instructions about what should happen, and then retreat from the scene to let students work as they wish. However, this retreat is only partial. Teachers rarely leave the room entirely for long periods of time. Instead, they sit at their desk, or off in a corner, observing groups get started on their projects.

For students to pretend as if a teacher is not in the room is almost impossible. Knowing that a teacher is nearby will cause some students to perform as the good, task-oriented members of the group. Others will just clam up for fear of saying or doing something stupid while a teacher is watching.

Students will wonder how the teacher thinks they're doing and will be watching her closely for any cues of approval or censure that she drops. Students' awareness of the power relationship that exists between themselves and their teachers is such that it pervades nearly all interactions between them.

A teacher cannot be a fly on the wall if that means being an unobtrusive observer. If you say nothing this will be interpreted either as withholding approval or as tacit agreement. Students will always be wondering what your opinion is about what they're doing. Better to give some brief indication of what's on your mind than to have students obsessed with whether your silence means disappointment or satisfaction with their efforts. A critically reflective teacher will make sure that she finds some way of regularly seeing what she does through students' eyes. In learning about the different ways in which students view her silence, she will be in a much better position to make sure that her fly on the wall presence has the helpful consequences she seeks. She will learn when, and how much, to disclose, and she will know about the confidence-inducing effects of such disclosure. She will also know when keeping her own counsel leads to students doing some productive reflection, and when it paralyses

her own counsel leads to students doing some productive reflection, and when it paralyzes them.

Discussion as Spontaneous Combustion

Teachers who, like myself, use discussion a great deal often have the same image of what an ideal discussion looks like. Usually, this is of a conversation in which the teacher says very little because students are talking so much. There is little silence in the room, what conversation there is focuses on relevant issues, and the level of discourse is suitably sophisticated. The Algonquin round table, a Bloomsbury dinner party or a Woody Allen film script comprise the models for good conversation. Discussions in which teachers are mostly silent are often regarded as the best discussions of all. We walk away from animated conversations dominated by students' voices with a sense that our time has been well spent.

This sense may be justified. But other readings of these discussions are possible. It may well be that by standing back and not intervening in the conversation we have allowed the reinforcement of differences of status existing in the wider society. As Doyle (1993) puts it, "the teacher closing a classroom door does not shut out the social, cultural, or historical realities of students" (p. 6). Students who see themselves as members of minority groups, and whose past experiences have produced legitimate fears about how they will be treated in an academic culture, may hold back. Out of a fear of being browbeaten by students of privilege, or from a desire not to look stupid, they may elect for silence (Fassinger, 1995). This silence will only be broken if a teacher intervenes to create a structured opportunity for all group members to say something. Also, students who are introverts, or those who need time for reflective analysis, may find the pace of conversation intimidating. In this instance inequity caused by personality or learning style, rather than that caused by race, class or gender, may be distorting what seems to be a conversation characterised by excitement and spontaneity.

A critically reflective teacher will be concerned to check whether or not her sense of pleasure in a discussion is matched by that of her students. She will find a way of compiling a regular emotional audit of how the conversation is experienced. On the basis of what she learns she will be able to make a more informed decision about when her silence enhances students' sense of participating in a spontaneous experience. She will be better placed to know when to structure participation or when to call for silent reflective interludes.

The Mandated Confessional

Student journals, portfolios and learning logs are all the rage amongst teachers who advocate experiential methods. Teachers believe that encouraging students to speak personally and directly about their experiences honors and encourages their authentic voices. That this often happens is undeniable. However, journals, portfolios and logs also have the potential to become ritualistic and mandated confessionals, the educational equivalents of the tabloid-like, sensationalistic outpourings of talk show participants.

Students who sense that their teacher is a strong advocate of experiential methods may pick up the implicit message that good students reveal dramatic, private episodes in their lives that lead to transformative insights. Students who don't have anything painful, traumatic or exciting to confess may start to feel that their journal is not quite what the teacher ordered. Not being able to produce revelations of sufficient intensity they may decide to invent some. Or, they may start to paint quite ordinary experiences with a sheen of transformative significance. A lack of dramatic experiences or insights may be perceived by students as a sign of failure - an indication that their lives are somehow incomplete and lived at a level that is insufficiently self-aware or exciting.

A teacher committed to critical reflection will constantly research how her students perceive her use of experiential methods such as journals, portfolios and logs. She will get inside their heads to check whether or not her instructions are unwittingly encouraging students to produce certain kinds of revelations. If she discovers this is the case, she will take steps to address this publicly. She will try to find some way of ensuring that she models a rejection of the belief that the more sensational the revelation, the better the grade, by adjusting the reward system accordingly.

Respect for Voice - "I Want to Hear Your Opinion, Not Mine"

Teachers committed to democratic classrooms often believe that speaking too much, or expressing their own opinions, will create in students' minds a hierarchy of 'acceptable' beliefs that parrot those held by the teacher. They believe that declaring their own biases and perspectives encourages students to gain teacher approval by uncritically regurgitating these rather than thinking issues through for themselves. So, when faced with students who ask the question "What do You Think?" teachers will sometimes reply something along the lines of "Well, it's not important what *I* think but it is important that *you* think this through by yourself. So I'm not going to tell you what I think until you've had the chance to air your own ideas." Done well, as in the case of Shor's (1992a) dialogic lecture, this withholding of opinions can encourage students' independence of thought. Done unreflectively, however, this apparently emancipatory prompt to critical analysis can induce mistrust and shut down learning.

learning.

From a student's viewpoint, teachers who withhold expression of their own opinions may be perceived as untrustworthy. Given the power relationship that pertains in a college classroom, teachers who refuse to say what they think can be seen as engaged in a manipulative game, the purpose of which is to trick students into saying the wrong thing. Students know that the teacher has the right answer but that for some reason she is not giving it to them. Instead, she is seen to be holding back the information that, if they had it, would allow them to perform well. She is asking students to risk declaring their own thinking without making public what she believes.

A critically reflective teacher would know the power - both positive and negative - of her withholding of speech. From researching her students' experiences she would get a better sense of the timing of her interventions. By asking them about their best and worst experiences as learners she would probably learn the importance of modeling first any risk taking that she subsequently requests of students.

Critical Reflection as the Recognition of Hegemonic Assumptions

The second purpose of critical reflection is to uncover hegemonic assumptions. Hegemonic assumptions are assumptions that we think are in our own best interests but that actually work against us in the long term. As developed by the Italian political economist Antonio Gramsci (1978), the term hegemony describes the process whereby ideas, structures and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, pre-ordained and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. The subtle cruelty of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and point the finger at an identifiable group or groups of people who we accuse as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life - the stock opinions, conventional wisdoms or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted. If there's a conspiracy here, is the conspiracy of the normal.

Hegemonic assumptions about teaching are eagerly embraced by teachers. They seem to represent what's good and true and therefore to be in their own best interests. Yet these assumptions actually end up serving the interests of groups that have little concern for teachers' mental or physical health. The dark irony of hegemony is that teachers take pride in acting on the very assumptions that work to enslave them. In working diligently to implement these assumptions, teachers become willing prisoners who lock their own cell doors behind them.

Critically reflective teachers are alert to hegemonic assumptions. They can uncover ideas about good teaching that seem obvious, even desirable, yet that end up harming and constraining them. They are able to see the insanity of aspiring to ways of teaching that end up seriously threatening their own well being. Let me give some examples of the kind of hegemonic assumptions I am talking about.

Teaching as a Vocation

Teachers sometimes speak of their work as a vocation. Thought of this way, teaching becomes work that implies that its practitioners are selfless servants of their calling, their students and their institutions. That teachers sometimes eagerly accept concepts of vocation and conscientiousness to justify their taking on backbreaking loads is evident from Campbell and Neill's (1994a,b) studies of teachers' work. A sense of calling becomes distorted to mean that they should deal with larger and larger numbers of students, regularly teach overload courses, serve on search, alumni and library committees, generate external funding by winning grant monies, and make occasional forays into scholarly publishing. And they should do all of this without complaining, which is the same as whining.

Teachers who take the idea of vocation as the organizing concept for their professional lives may start to think of any day on which they don't come home exhausted as a day wasted. Or, if not a day wasted, then at least a day when they have not been all that they can be (it's interesting that so many teachers have adopted a slogan to describe their work that first appeared in commercials for army recruitment). Diligent devotion to the college's many ends (some of which are bound to be contradictory) may come to be seen as the mark of a good teacher.

So what seems on the surface to be a politically neutral idea on which all could agree - that teaching is a vocation calling for dedication and hard work - may be interpreted by teachers as meaning that they should squeeze the work of two or three jobs into the space where one can sit comfortably. 'Vocation' thus becomes a hegemonic concept - an idea that seems neutral, consensual and obvious, and that teachers gladly embrace, but one that ends up working against their own best interests. The concept of vocation ends up serving the interests of those who want to run colleges efficiently and profitably while spending the least amount of money and employing the smallest number of staff that they can get away with.

A critically reflective teacher can stand outside her practice and see what she does from a wider perspective. She

knows that curriculum content and evaluative procedures are social products that are located in time and space, and that they probably reproduce the inequities of the wider culture. She is able to distinguish between a justifiable and necessary dedication to students' well being, and a self-destructive workaholism. She has a well grounded rationale for her practice that she can call on to help her make difficult decisions in unpredictable situations.

This rationale - a set of critically examined core assumptions about why she does what she does in the way that she does it - is a survival necessity. It anchors teachers in a moral, intellectual and political project and gives them an organizing vision of what they are trying to accomplish. By prioritizing what is really important in their work a critical rationale helps teachers keep in perspective their own tendency to translate a sense of vocation into meaning that they have to do everything asked of them.

The Perfect Ten Syndrome

Many teachers take an understandable pride in their craft wisdom and knowledge. They want to be good at what they do and, consequently, they put great store in students' evaluations of their teaching. When these are less than perfect - as is almost inevitable - teachers assume the worst. All those evaluations that are complimentary are forgotten while those that are negative assume disproportionate significance. Indeed, the inference is often made that bad evaluations must, by definition, be written by students with heightened powers of pedagogic discrimination. Conversely, good evaluations are thought to be produced by students who are half asleep.

This constant inability to receive uniformly good evaluations leads to feelings of guilt concerning one's incompetence. When we keep these evaluations to ourselves (as is typical given the privatized culture of many college campuses) the sense of failure becomes almost intolerable. We are convinced that we are the only ones who receive bad evaluations and that everyone else is universally loved. In this way an admirable desire to do good work, and the assumption that good evaluations signify this, becomes a source of demoralization.

A critically reflective teacher recognizes the error of assuming that good teaching is always signalled by the receipt of uniformly good student evaluations. She knows that the complexities of learning and the presence among students of diverse personalities, cultural backgrounds, genders, ability levels, learning styles, ideological orientations and previous experiences, makes a perfect ten impossible to achieve. Given the diversity of college classrooms (particularly those in urban areas) no actions a teacher takes can ever be experienced as universally and uniformly positive. She knows, too, that teacher assessment and performance appraisal mechanisms that reward perfect scores don't serve students' interests. For one thing, good evaluations are sometimes the result of teachers pandering to students' prejudices. Teachers are almost bound to be liked if they never challenge students' taken for granted ways of thinking and behaving, or if they allow them to work only within their preferred learning styles. Since letting people stick with what comes easy to them is a form of cognitive imprisonment, one could almost say that anyone who consistently scores a perfect ten is just as likely to be doing something wrong, as something right.

So whose interests does the perfect ten assumption serve, if not that of students and teachers? Primarily, it serves those with a reductionist cast of mind who believe that the dynamics and contradictions of teaching can be reduced to a linear, quantifiable rating system. Epistemologically challenged people like this sometimes end up in positions of administrative and legislative power. Believing that learning and teaching are unidimensional, they carve curricula into discrete units and they create standardized objectives that are meant to be context and culture proof. In their minds teaching becomes the simple implementation of centrally produced curricula and objectives. Good or bad teaching then becomes measured by how well these are put into effect.

Judging teaching by how many people say they like what you do supports a divisive professional ethic that rewards those who are the most popular. The perfect ten syndrome makes life easier for those who have the responsibility of deciding which of their staff are to be promoted. All they need to do is consult student ratings since, according to this assumption, the best teachers are obviously those with the highest scores. This turns professional advancement into a contest in which the winners are those who get the most students to say they like them. Administrators who use this ratings system are not venal or oppressive. They are tired and burned out from making an unworkable system look like it's working. So if a neat solution (giving promotion to those with the highest scores on student evaluations) appears to a difficult problem (deciding who of their staff advances) we can hardly blame them for embracing it.

Deep Space Nine - The Answer Must be Out There Somewhere

For many teachers the first response to encountering a problem of practice is to look for a manual, workshop or person that can solve it. Students refusing to learn? Buy a book on dealing with resistance to learning. Classes full of students with different backgrounds.

...meeting their resistance to learning. ...classes full of students that ...the being ... expectations, ability levels and experiences? Enrol in that summer institute on dealing with diversity. Running discussions that are dominated by a handful of confident, articulate students? Go and see how that colleague across campus that everyone raves about runs her discussions.

All these resources for dealing with problems are useful and necessary. I have written books that dealt with resistance to learning, run workshops on dealing with diversity, and invited colleagues to watch me teach, so I don't want to decry the importance of doing these kinds of things. I do want to point out, however, that while reading books, attending workshops and watching colleagues can give you some useful insights and techniques that will help you in dealing with your problem, it is wrong to assume that at some point in these activities you will inevitably stumble on the exact answer to the problem you are experiencing.

To think this way is to fall victim to a fundamental epistemological distortion. This distortion holds that someone, or something, out there has the knowledge that constitutes the answer to our problems. We think that if we just look long and hard enough we will find the manual, workshop or person that will tell us exactly what we need to do. Occasionally, this might happen. But much more often than not, any ideas or suggestions we pick up will have to be sculpted to fit the local conditions in which we work. And that goes for all the suggestions I make in this book on how to become critically reflective.

Unless we challenge this epistemological distortion we risk spending a great deal of energy castigating ourselves for our inability to make externally prescribed solutions fit the problems we are facing. It never occurs to us that what needs questioning is the assumption that neat answers to our problems are always waiting to be discovered outside our experience. It can take many demoralizing disappointments and misfirings - applications of standardized rules that vary wildly in their success - before we realize the fruitlessness of the quest for standardized certainty.

A critically reflective teacher has researched her teaching and her students enough to know that methods and practices imported from outside rarely fit snugly into the contours of her classrooms. She is aware that difficult problems never have standardized solutions. At best, they call forth a multiplicity of partial responses. She also knows that a significant, but neglected, starting point for dealing with these problems is the critical analysis of her own autobiographical experience. On their own, autobiographies are suspect and subject to the dangers of distortion and overgeneralization. But when critically analyzed and combined with other sources of reflection such as colleagues' experiences, students' perceptions and formal theory, autobiographies can be a powerful source of insight into the resolution of problems.

The idea that our complex questions of practice always have simple answers designed by others serves the interests of those who accrue power, prestige and financial reward from designing and producing these answers. Consultants, authors, and production companies rarely say of their products 'these might be useful but only if you research your local conditions and adapt what is here to your own circumstances'. Neither do they advocate a mixing and matching of their products with elements from other those marketed by their rivals. To say this would negate the chief appeal of these products, which is their promise that they will take care of our problems for us. This removes from our shoulders the tiresome responsibility of having to analyse our own experiences critically or to research our contexts for practice. This is a comforting feeling but it is ultimately damaging to our sense of ourselves as purposeful agents.

We Meet Everyone's Needs

The 'meeting needs' rationale for justifying practice is alive and well in higher education. For example, when asked to explain why they've taken a particular decision, administrators will often justify what they've done by saying that they're meeting the community's, the faculty's, or the students', needs. Likewise, teachers will say that the best classes are those in which every student feels their needs have been met. The assumption that good teachers meet all students' needs all the time is guaranteed to leave us feeling incompetent and demoralized.

The trouble with the meeting needs rationale is not just that it is impossible to satisfy but that students' articulation of their needs is sometimes done in a distorted and harmful way. Students who define their need as never straying beyond comfortable ways of thinking, acting and learning, are not always in the best position to judge what is in their own best interests. I don't believe that teachers can force people to learn, but I do believe that they can lay out for students the consequences (especially the negative consequences) of their sticking with their own definitions of need. They can also suggest alternatives to students' definitions that are broadening.

A critically reflective teacher knows that while meeting everyone's needs sounds compassionate and student-centered it is pedagogically unsound and psychologically demoralizing. She knows that clinging to this assumption will only cause her to carry around a permanent burden of guilt at her inability to live up to this impossible task. She is aware that what seems to be an admirable guiding rule for teachers, and one that she is tempted to embrace, will end up destroying her.

The meeting needs assumption serves the interests of those who believe that educational processes can be understood and practised as a capitalist economic system. Higher education becomes viewed as a market place in which different businesses (colleges) compete for a limited number of consumers. Those who survive because they have enough consumers must, by definition, be doing a good job. State colleges need to attract and graduate large numbers of students if they are to continue to be funded. Private colleges depend on tuition revenue to survive. Under such circumstances keeping the consumers (students) happy enough so that they don't buy the product (education) elsewhere is the bottom line for institutional success.

When education is viewed this way then we devote a lot of energy to keeping the customer satisfied. We definitely don't want him to feel confused or angry because we have asked him to do something he finds difficult and would rather avoid. The problem with this way of thinking about education is that it ignores pedagogic reality. Significant learning and critical thinking inevitably induces an ambivalent mix of feelings and emotions, in which anger and confusion are as prominent as pleasure and clarity. The most hallowed rule of business - that the customer is always right - is often pedagogically wrong. Equating good teaching with how many students feel you have done what they wanted ignores the dynamics of teaching and prevents significant learning.

Why is Critical Reflection Important ?

Given that critical reflection entails all kinds of risks and complexities, there have to be some compelling reasons why anyone would choose to begin the critical journey. Few of us are likely to initiate a project that promises enlightenment only at the cost of masochism. Choosing to become critically reflective will only happen if we see clearly that is in our own best interests. Otherwise, given the already overcrowded nature of our lives, why should we bother to take this activity seriously ? I believe there are six reasons why learning critical reflection is important.

It Helps Us Take Informed Actions

Simple utilitarianism dictates that critical reflection is an important habit for teachers to develop. As is evident from the examples scattered throughout this chapter, becoming critically reflective raises our chances of taking informed actions. By informed actions I mean actions that are based on assumptions that have been carefully and critically investigated. These actions can be explained and justified to ourselves and others. If a student or colleague asks us why we're doing something, we can show how our action springs from certain assumptions we hold about teaching and learning. We can then lay out the evidence (experiential as well as theoretical) that undergirds these and we can make a convincing case for their accuracy.

An informed action is one that has a good chance of achieving the consequences intended. It is an action that is taken against a backdrop of inquiry into how people perceive what we say and do. When we behave in certain ways we expect our students and colleagues to read into our behaviors the meanings we intend. Frequently, however, our words and actions are given meanings that are very different from, and sometimes directly antithetical to, those we intended. When we have seen our practice through others' eyes we are in a much better position to speak and behave in ways that ensure that a consistency of meaning exists between us, our students and our colleagues. This consistency of meaning increases the likelihood that our actions have the effects we want.

It Helps Us Develop a Rationale for Practice

The critically reflective habit confers a deeper benefit than that of procedural utility. It grounds not only our actions, but also our sense of who we are as teachers in an examined reality. We know why we believe what we believe, A critically reflective teacher is much better placed to communicate to colleagues and students (as well as to herself) the rationale behind her practice. She works from a position of informed commitment. She knows why she does and thinks, what she does and thinks. Knowing this she communicates to students a confidence-inducing sense of being grounded. This sense of groundedness stabilizes her when she feels swept along by forces she cannot control.

A critical rationale grounds our most difficult decisions in core beliefs, values and assumptions about which we feel some confidence. As I found out when interviewing students for *The Skillful Teacher* (1990a), a teacher's ability to make clear what it is that she stands for, and why she believes this is important, is a crucial factor in establishing her credibility with students. Even students who disagree fundamentally with a teacher's rationale gain confidence from knowing what it is. In this instance knowledge really is power. According to students, the worst position to be in is to sense that a teacher has an agenda and a preferred way of working, but not to know exactly what these are. Without this information, they complain, how can they trust the teacher or know what they're dealing with ?

A critical rationale for practice is a psychological, professional and political necessity. Without

it we are tossed about by whatever political or pedagogical winds are blowing at the time. A rationale serves as a methodological and ethical anchor. It provides a foundational reference point - a set of continually tested beliefs that we can consult as a guide to help us decide how we should act in unpredictable situations. But a critical rationale for practice is not a static, for all time construct. It is shaped in a particular context and needs to keep adapting to different circumstances. Although our foundational beliefs (such as a commitment to democratic process or a belief in critical thinking) can remain essentially unchanged, we keep learning different ways to realize them in our work.

It Helps Us Avoid Self-Laceration

If we are critically reflective we are also less prone to self-laceration. A tendency of teachers who take their work seriously is for them to blame themselves if students are not learning. These teachers feel that at some level they are the cause of the anger, hostility, resentment or indifference that even the best and most energetic of them are bound to encounter from time to time. Believing themselves to be the cause of these emotions and feelings, they automatically infer that they are also their solution. They take upon themselves the responsibility for turning hostile, bored or puzzled students into galvanized advocates for their subjects brimming over with the joys of learning. When this doesn't happen (as is almost always the case) these teachers allow themselves to become consumed with guilt for what they believe is their pedagogic incompetence.

Critically reflective teachers who systematically investigate how their students are experiencing learning know that much student resistance is socially and politically sculpted. Realizing that resistance to learning often has nothing to do with what they've done as teachers, helps them make a healthier, more realistic appraisal of their own role in, or responsibility for, creating resistance. They learn to stop blaming themselves and they develop a more accurate understanding of the cultural and political limits to their ability to convert resistance into enthusiasm.

It Grounds Us Emotionally

Critical reflection also grounds us emotionally. When we neglect to clarify and question our assumptions, and when we fail to research our students, we have the sense that the world is governed by chaos. Whether or not we do well seems to be largely a matter of luck. Lacking a reflective orientation we place an unseemly amount of trust in the role of chance. We inhabit what Freire (1993) calls a condition of magical consciousness. Fate or serendipity are seen as shaping educational process, rather than human agency. The world is experienced as arbitrary, as governed by a whimsical God.

When we think this way we are powerless to control the ebbs and flows of our emotions. One day a small success causes us to blow our level of self-confidence out of all proportion. The next, an equally small failure (such as one bad evaluative comment out of twenty good ones) is taken as a devastating indictment of our inadequacy. Teachers caught on this emotional roller coaster, where every action either confirms their brilliance or underscores their failure, cannot survive intact for long. Either they withdraw from the classroom or they are forced to suppress (at their eventual peril) the emotional underpinning to their daily experiences. So the critically reflective habit is connected to teachers' morale in powerful ways.

It Enlivens Our Classrooms

It is important to realize the implications for our students of our own critical reflection. Students put great store by our actions and they learn a great deal from observing how we model intellectual inquiry and democratic process. Given that this is so, a critically reflective teacher activates her classroom by providing a model of passionate skepticism. As Osterman (1990) comments, "critically reflective teachers - teachers who make their own thinking public, and therefore subject to discussion - are more likely to have classes that are challenging, interesting, and stimulating for students" (p. 139).

We know that students observe us closely and that they are quick to notice and condemn any inconsistency between what we say we believe and what we actually do. They tell us that seeing a teacher model critical thinking in front of them is enormously helpful to their own efforts to think dialectically. By openly questioning our own ideas and assumptions - even as we explain why we believe in them so passionately - we create an emotional climate in which accepting change and risking failure are valued. By inviting students to critique our efforts - and by showing them that we appreciate these critiques and treat them with the utmost seriousness - we deconstruct traditional power dynamics and relationships that stultify critical inquiry. A teacher who models critical inquiry into her own practice is one of the most powerful catalysts for critical thinking in her own students. For this reason, if for no other, engaging in critical reflection should become perhaps the most important indicator we look for in any attempt to judge teachers' effectiveness.

It Increases Democratic Trust

What we do as teachers makes a difference in the world. In our classrooms students learn democratic or manipulative behavior. They learn whether independence of thought is really valued, or whether everything depends on pleasing the teacher. They learn either that

success depends on beating someone to the prize using whatever advantage they can, or on working collectively. Standing above the fray by saying that our practice is a-political is not an option for a teacher. Even if we profess to have no political stance, and to be concerned purely with furthering inquiry into a discrete body of objective ideas or practices, what we do counts. The ways we encourage or inhibit students' questions, the kinds of reward systems we create, and the degree of attention we pay to their concerns, all create a moral tone and a political culture.

Teachers who have learned the reflective habit know something about the effects they are having on students. They are alert to the presence of power in their classrooms and to its possibilities for misuse. Knowing that their actions can silence or activate students' voices, they listen seriously and attentively to what students say. They deliberately create public reflective moments when students' concerns - not the teacher's agenda - are the focus of classroom activity. Week in, week out, they make public disclosure of private realities, both to their students and to their colleagues. They make constant attempts to find out how students are experiencing their classes and they make this information public. All their actions are explicitly grounded in reference to students' experiences, and students know and appreciate this.

Trust is the thread that ties these practices together. Through their actions teachers build or diminish the amount of trust in the world. Coming to trust another person is the most fragile of human projects. It requires knowing someone over a period of time and seeing their honesty modeled in their actions. College classrooms provide the conditions in which people can learn to trust or mistrust each other. A teacher who takes students seriously and treats them as adults shows that she can be trusted. A teacher who emphasizes peer learning shows that it's important to trust other students. A teacher who encourages students to point out to her what about her actions is oppressive, and who seeks to change what she does in response to their concerns, is a model of critical reflection. Such a teacher is one who truly is trustworthy.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, critical reflection is inherently ideological. It is also morally grounded. It springs from a concern to create the conditions under which people can learn to love one another, and it alerts them to the forces that prevent this. Being anchored in values of justice, fairness and compassion, critical reflection finds its political representation in the democratic process. Since it is difficult to show love to others when we are divided, suspicious and scrambling for advantage, critical reflection urges us to create conditions under which each person is respected, valued and heard. In pedagogic terms this means the creation of democratic classrooms. In terms of professional development it means an engagement in critical conversation. The rest of this book explores how both these projects can be realized.

Last modified on: 2005-05-01 12:58:55 by: [NLU Webmaster](#) _co-mead.nl.edu_