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Commentary

Casting a Critical Glance at Teaching “Critical Thinking”

Michael DeCesare¹

I.

If there is one word that characterizes all three of the thoughtful articles in the “Teaching and Learning Amidst Diversity” section of this inaugural issue of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, that word is *critical*; indeed, the word is in two of the papers’ titles. Perhaps this is as it should be. From the corridors of the White House to the hallways of American schools, *critical* has long been one of the buzzwords in the ongoing national conversation about higher education. Critical thinking skills, as well as the abilities to read and write critically, are cornerstone ideals—if not demonstrable realities—of schooling in this country. It is difficult to find a course syllabus, a department mission statement, or a college vision statement that does not highlight the word *critical*. It seems, in fact, that learning to be “critical” long ago became critical.

Like all buzzwords, though, the term *critical* has come to include so many different—and disparate—characteristics, that it long ago lost any true meaning in higher education. Judging from the literature on teaching so-called “critical skills,” to be *critical* is to be, by turns, thoughtful, democratic, concerned about social justice, personal, honest, or simply active in the classroom. Surely, to be critical must mean to be something narrower, more defined and definite; it must be something less trendy than the professional educator’s fashion *du jour*. Mustn’t it?

II.

Some Critical Thinking about Critical Thinking

At this point, we simply do not know. Given the ubiquity in higher education of the adjective “critical”, as well as the lip-service paid to the concept by administrators and educators across the country, surprisingly little scholarship has tried to answer a fundamental question: What, in actual practice, does it mean to be a *critical thinker*?² Each of the three articles in the “Teaching and Learning Amidst Diversity” section of this issue of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* offers a thoughtful, thought not entirely satisfactory, answer. If the authors of these articles have left me unsatisfied, it is due in a much larger part to the mercurial nature of the term *critical* than to the limitations of their scholarship.

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² Like the authors of the papers I am discussing, I am primarily concerned here with critical *thinking*, as opposed to critical writing and critical reading.

Harkins and Wells lead off by describing an in-class exercise in conflict resolution, in order to draw a distinction between *critical* and *discursive* pedagogy. The goal of their exercise—asking students to grade one another on weekly quizzes, and then giving each student the options of accepting the grade or negotiating for a different one—was “to uncover the subjective nature of truth and the difficulties inherent in deciding whose truth matters” (p. 41). There can be no doubt that such a goal is properly classified under the heading “critical thinking.”

But in the case described by Harkins and Wells, the intended result came troublingly close to being overshadowed by some unintended consequences. First, the authors found that “[m]any students were frustrated and only a few students understood the relevance of exploring the issue deeply from the beginning” (p. 47). In addition, despite the fact that “the major goal of the course was to teach about conflicts, many students thought that the teacher should be telling students the answer and grading them on whether or not they had memorized it” (p. 47). These observations are telling for a couple of reasons.

First, there is a fine line to walk between engaging students in something with which they are unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and frustrating them. Of course, one should encounter some frustration in the process of thinking critically about any subject. But the degree of frustration that seems to have characterized the course described by Harkins and Wells begs the question: How many students actually learned something valuable as a result of this exercise? If “few” understood the importance of the exercise, and “many” believed the teacher should simply be providing the answer, then the answer would seem to be a small number.

Second, and perhaps more important, teaching critical thinking skills is not a one-way street, as we typically seem to think; it requires consent, as well as a certain degree of willingness, on the part of our students. If our students are unwilling, or unable, to meet us halfway, little to no room will be left for the development of critical thinking skills. Given some of the trends described by Wells and Harkins in their second article on “Teaching the Diversity Course in Conservative Times,” one wonders about one’s chances of even leading the horses to the well, let alone of convincing them to take a drink.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Harkins decided to halt the exercise at the end of the sixth week, at which point “at least half of the students were frustrated at their own inability to reach a decision” (p. 47). Still, the authors—somewhat inexplicably—deemed the exercise a success because students “recognized the value in addressing the deeper issues of fairness, perspective-taking, and social justice through an activity in which they actively chose to participate” (p. 47). Harkins and Wells go on to argue that students “learned that they must stand up for their rights and listen to other voices” and were provided “the opportunity to affirm their own histories through social practices, language, and content that are respectful of their own cultural experiences” (p. 47-48). And the instructors themselves “provide[d] the resources needed for students to become active participants in shaping their futures” (p. 48).

These supposed benefits of the exercise strike me as much less about critical thinking than about what educators have recently been calling “active learning”, “personal empowerment”, and “cultural sensitivity.” Teaching students to stand up for themselves and to listen to others does not teach them critical thinking skills. It teaches them the importance of empowering themselves and being sensitive to the views of others. Requiring students to actively participate in an in-class exercise does not teach them critical thinking skills either. It teaches them to value active learning (and to obey the instructor). Finally, teaching students to understand and respect their own experiences does not teach them critical thinking skills. It teaches them, once again, the importance of personal empowerment. By the end of Harkins and Wells’ article, one is left with too vague a notion of what the adjective “critical” really means, whether it is used to describe teaching, pedagogy, or thinking.

In the second article, about teaching introductory psychology at HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities), Michele Lewis and Anna Lee suggest that *critical consciousness* “represents the capacity to both critically reflect upon *and* act upon one’s sociopolitical environment” (p. 50, italics mine).³ The authors are very clear about their dual emphases on “developing students’ capability for reflection and [teaching students to take] action against injustices” (p. 58). Being “critical”, from Lewis and Lee’s perspective, means being reflective *and* active.

Reflecting seems like a good first step on the path toward becoming critical. But the second aspect of the authors’ definition of critical consciousness, namely *acting* upon one’s environment, seems problematic. After all, teaching students to reflect is one thing; teaching them to act is quite another. Indeed, the authors—in a turn of phrasing that would likely send shivers up even Orwell’s spine—chillingly refer to “a type of structured programming” that could profitably take place in the psychology classroom (p. 51). If helping students develop their critical faculties involves “programming” them, then we need to seriously reconsider in their entirety the purpose and meaning of higher education.

On some level, Lewis and Lee understand this. That may be why they explain quite well the *reflective* component of each of the six topics they typically cover in the general psychology course (i.e., stress and health, identity development, personality, sensation and perception, learning and conditioning, and research methods), but do a decidedly poorer job of explaining exactly how they incorporate the *active* component of critical consciousness into these six topics.

The authors claim, for example, that their students’ responses to the stress and health section of the course are “adequately inclusive of suggestions for the creation of non-profits, schools, and community programs” (p. 54). Regarding identity development, all we are told is that the authors assign points to their students’ assignments, in part, based on the students’ suggestions for “actions they feel psychologists could take to address social problems” (p. 54). Of the topic of personality, they argue that “the possibilities are endless for students to take sociopolitical action and affect change in the trans community” (p. 55). In the section of their article on “Sensation and Perception” the authors provide one “example of the action component of critical consciousness development”: A student who was motivated by the in-class discussion to pursue independent research about “whether there are dating services for sensory challenged persons” (p. 56). An assignment in the “Learning and Conditioning” section of the course allows the authors “to present to students how the research of psychologists addresses social problems” (p. 57). Finally, in the process of discussing research methods, Lewis and Lee “provide students with evidence of how research in applied social psychology has the potential to produce findings that bring about social change” (p. 57).

By failing to convincingly or even fully describe how they teach their students to act upon their “sociopolitical environment”, Lewis and Lee demonstrate the limitations of their conception and

³ I should mention here that I have limited myself to a critique of Lewis and Lee’s conception of *critical consciousness*. But an additional question could be raised about their article: What exactly about the authors’ argument—focusing overwhelmingly as it does on the general development of students’ critical consciousness—is unique to the HBCU context? Lewis and Lee argue that “the pedagogy for psychology at the HBCU should incorporate contextually relevant socio-cultural and critical consciousness perspectives into every course”, but the same argument could, and probably should, be made about teaching psychology at any college or university. In addition, the authors then seem to dismiss their own emphasis on HBCUs by suggesting that the focus of the curriculum should be not only on race and ethnicity, but also on aging, disability, gender, and sexual orientation (pp. 51-52). Thus, the reader is forced to ask: What about the authors’ pedagogy is unique to the HBCU context? In my view, Lewis and Lee have not adequately answered this question.

definition of *critical consciousness*. Like Harkins and Wells, they leave their readers with an incomplete, and therefore unsatisfactory, description of what it means to be “critical.” For Harkins and Wells, being critical involves frankly discussing “fairness, perspective-taking, and social justice”, teaching students to stand up for their rights and to listen to others’ perspectives, and giving students the opportunity to affirm the importance of their own cultural backgrounds and experiences (p 47). For Lewis and Lee, it involves reflecting upon a vague construct they call the “sociopolitical environment.” These are two very different definitions of being “critical.”

The third and final article, Wells and Harkins’ piece on teaching a course on diversity during “conservative times”, rests on the assumption that we are, in fact, living in “conservative times.” The authors claim that everything from cultural sensitivity, to beliefs in the importance of community research and in self-examination among instructors, are under attack during these oppressive times of living “in the shadow” (p. 69). It is unclear, however, whether the authors believe the attack is confined to academic psychology or is being perpetrated against the entirety of academia, or both.

Regardless, it is difficult to swallow Wells and Harkins’ argument, which is clearly critical of “conservative thinking”.⁴ For one, it is characterized by too many unsubstantiated claims, like the one we encounter as the first sentence of the paper: “Shifting conversations in American politics, from liberal to conservative are reshaping the basis for multi-cultural and diversity courses in academic psychology” (p. 60). Two pages later, we read: “Differences that threaten the status-quo are now more likely to be punished and adjusted, rather than celebrated and studied” (p. 62). And again:

The teaching of future clinicians and researchers in the field of psychology has become constrained and limited in terms of the course materials deemed acceptable, the value placed on diversity courses by certain departments of psychology, the likely reaction of undergraduate and graduate students who attend diversity courses and the methods that can be used to present material in psychology classes. (p. 63)

Unfortunately, the authors provide virtually no evidence, very few recent citations, and almost no support for these or any of the other claims they rely upon to make their case. In addition, I would suggest that their claims fly in the face of the daily experiences of most academics.

The little evidence that Wells and Harkins do offer is flimsy at best. Regarding their argument that course material, pedagogical methods, and course design may be restricted during times when conservative thinking dominates, the authors offer the example of Mary Daly, the radical feminist and Boston College professor who was forced to retire in the late 1990s “after a decade of teaching ‘all female’ college courses about women’s issues” (p. 63). But Daly’s retirement came in the middle of President Clinton’s second term—hardly a “conservative time” by any measure. In addition, it should be noted that Daly’s “retirement” came several years before the supposed “post-9/11 . . . shift[. . .] toward greater concerns about controlling tyrannical elements among diverse, underrepresented people, in and outside of America” (p. 63).

One of Harkins and Wells’ conclusions is this: “Everything about the design of a course, from procedures for grading to outside of classroom, hands-on experiences can become a source of contention where more conservative thinking prevails” (p. 64). In response, I would ask: Could the same not be said of periods in which more liberal thinking prevails? To put it differently, if we substitute the term “liberal” for the term “conservative” in the quoted sentence, how does the

⁴ I put this term in quotation marks because the authors themselves are hard-pressed to define it (see pp. 60-61). I also do not pretend to have a succinct definition in mind or at hand.

authors' argument change? I do not believe it does—unless one has a political or ideological axe to grind.

III.

Final Thoughts

To think critically is to do more than simply reflect on what one has read or heard. Critical thinking also involves more than just shaking one's head and wagging one's finger at one's ideological or political opponents. Thinking critically must be more than proclaiming one's own argument correct and everyone else's incorrect. So what is it, then?

Though I am reluctant to offer yet another definition of *critical thinking* here, it may be instructive to briefly examine the etymology of the English word *critic*. The term is derived from the Greek word *kritikos*, meaning “skilled in judging” or “able to make judgments or discern.” As college professors, we wish to teach our students to discern between good and bad, to judge right and wrong, to distinguish correct from incorrect. We wish to teach them, as the American Heritage dictionary's definition of the term *critic* puts it, to form and express judgments of the merits, faults, value, or truth of a matter. We wish, in other words, to teach our students the value of reason, of empirical evidence, of logic, of thoughtfulness, in discovering and uncovering, as nearly as possible, “facts” and “truths” about the social world.

Perhaps we give ourselves the best chance of being successful by asking students to undertake research projects like those described by Misra (1997). Maybe we can most effectively teach critical thinking by requiring students to analyze current news stories, as Malcom (2006) does. Perhaps critical thinking skills develop most fully as a result of one or all of the suggestions made by the authors of the three articles that I have critiqued here. Or maybe all of these authors have it wrong.

I put the words *facts* and *truths* in quotation marks above to denote that some facts and truths are more factual and truthful than others. Regardless of whether we require research projects or media analyses, whether we subscribe to critical or discursive pedagogy, whether we teach at a historically black college or some other type of institution, or whether we teach during conservative times or liberal times, it is our responsibility, our only purpose really, to teach students how to find the most factual facts and truthful truths—and then to ask questions about them.

To do so, I believe, is to truly teach critical thinking.

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