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What is the Critical Idea?: Some Preliminary Notes on Critical Pedagogy

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What is the Critical Idea?: Some Preliminary Notes on Critical Pedagogy

Abstract

In the previous edition of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, DeCesare offers some thoughtful comments concerning the role of the term “critical” as it relates to the three articles in the “Teaching and Learning Amidst Diversity” section. In response to Harkins and Wells (2009), DeCesare (2009) proposes three primary criticisms: (1) “Teaching students to stand up for themselves and to listen to others does not teach them critical thinking skills;” (2) “Requiring students to actively participate in an in-class exercise does not teach critical thinking skills;” and (3) “Teaching students to understand and repeat personal experiences does not teach critical thinking skills” (p. 74). DeCesare criticized Harkins and Wells’ conception of critical pedagogy stating that it is “less about critical thinking than about what educators have recently been calling ‘active learning,’ ‘personal empowerment,’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’” (p. 77). DeCesare’s criticisms, I believe, missed the essential point of the exercise. The current paper offers a few comments of clarification to identify principles for further exploration.

Keywords

Commentary, critical pedagogy

What is the critical idea?: Some preliminary notes on critical pedagogy

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I.

Introduction

In the previous edition of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, DeCesare offers some thoughtful comments concerning the role of the term “critical” as it relates to the three articles in the “Teaching and Learning Amidst Diversity” section. In response to Harkins and Wells (2009), DeCesare (2009) proposes three primary criticisms: (1) “Teaching students to stand up for themselves and to listen to others does not teach them critical thinking skills;” (2) “Requiring students to actively participate in an in-class exercise does not teach critical thinking skills;” and (3) “Teaching students to understand and repeat personal experiences does not teach critical thinking skills” (p. 74). DeCesare criticized Harkins and Wells’ conception of critical pedagogy stating that it is “less about critical thinking than about what educators have recently been calling ‘active learning,’ ‘personal empowerment,’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’” (p. 77). DeCesare’s criticisms, I believe, missed the essential point of the exercise. The current paper offers a few comments of clarification to identify principles for further exploration.

II.

A Brief Note on Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

Prior to assessing DeCesare’s arguments, it is important to clarify the difference between critical pedagogy and critical thinking. The former is intended to create a sociopolitical system of all-inclusivity and mutual participation. Critical pedagogy facilitates a situation such that individual and social narratives are made part of the dialogue rather than used as a mechanism to exclude perspectives. Consistent with this view, Thousand et al. (1999) contend that the dialogue established in a critical pedagogy creates a “space” in which individuals share perspectives and become considerate of other people.

Critical thinking, on the other hand, I narrowly define as the meticulous dissemination of complex arguments. Deriving from the Derridian concept (or non-concept), dissemination signifies the simultaneous presence and absence of meaning or, more specifically, the Other (Derrida, 2007), critical thinking operates to dismantle and separate ideologies, opening the possibility of future meaning. In other words, meaning reveals itself as both present and absent. Analysis of arguments gradually reveals conflict in the approaching dialectic. However, given that meaning is always absent (in the same sense it is present), shaping debate continues to

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obscure difference, and thus paves the way for future emergence (Gunder, 2005). This position is consistent with Richardson and Slife (2011) given that shaping debate requires open-minded participation of willing agents engaged in dialogue. As such, we find a hermeneutic forthcoming consisting of critique and re-critique. The continual process of re-critique/reinterpretation produces innovation of thought. Critical thinking, therefore, is the embodiment of this process.

III.

Some Critical Thoughts on Critical Pedagogy

First, DeCesare's comments on empowerment misrepresent the function of a critical pedagogy. DeCesare states, "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" (p. 74). In a sense, these statements are true. However, it does not capture the essential meaning of the case. Harkins and Wells examined the role of critical pedagogy as a means for facilitating diversity. The exercise intended to teach students about conflicts and inclusion of perspectives. Critical thinking is a consequence of a critical pedagogy. In other words, critical pedagogy precedes critical thinking. However, critical thinking is merely *one* consequence of a critical pedagogy. Other consequences include: perspective-taking and gradual inclusion of the other, empowering the voice of the other, and the capacity for introspective analysis. This concept is consistent with Morey's (2000) formation of the inclusive and transformed pedagogy. Harkins and Wells illustrate this point as such:

Critical pedagogy attempts to teach students to question the hidden assumptions of universality and objectivity as well as the class, gender, racial, and cultural biases present in the mainstream educational pedagogy. The main goal of critical pedagogy is to expose the illusion of educational neutrality present in most schooling. Educational neutrality is akin to cultural universality in the field of psychology (p. 40).

Contrary to DeCesare's analysis, the issue involves paradigms and their role in the educational process. In other words, how do individuals resolve conflicts between two paradigms without favoring one over the other? I use the term "paradigm" to express cultural, social, political, educational, religious, and economic factors that influence the individual's thinking and behavior. These paradigms operate in the background of our thoughts and actions. In some cases, the instructor is unaware of each paradigm's influence over his or her behavior (Sadker & Sadker, 1992). Morey (2002) argued that pedagogy designed for diversity requires systemic and curriculum changes such that it fosters perspective-sharing and cultural autonomy. Morey suggests a paradigm shift in the values associated with traditional methods to a more inclusive or transformed pedagogy. While inclusive methods open the possibility of other perspectives, a transformed pedagogy minimizes the power relations between teacher/student dyads to provide an arena for difference.

How does a critical pedagogy begin to resolve conflicts between paradigms? Critical pedagogy itself establishes a paradoxical position. On the one hand, it empowers students to confront and question epistemological structures backed by social, economic, political, and cultural influences. On the other hand, given the function of a critical pedagogy, pedagogical strategies require structure such that learned principles become systematic or standardized (Cho & Lewis, 2005). This conflict suggests two factors: surface implications and internal implications. On the surface, students are empowered to critique and question classroom operations and standards. Internally, students are empowered to question larger socio-political

and cultural issues. Regardless of one's social, political, or cultural perspective it brings into question multiple perspectives and their paradigms of influence. In Harkins and Wells' case, students were empowered to discuss instructional preference while being confronted with positions inconsistent with personal beliefs.

An emphasis should be placed on the word *empowerment*. DeCesare's confusion (i.e. empowerment does not teach critical thinking), I argue, consists of a misappropriated sense of empowerment. Empowerment is a function of the instructor and therefore the pedagogy. Empowerment shifts the dynamic from a position where the instructor is an all-knowing facilitator of knowledge to a position where commonly accepted "truths" are open for interpretation and critique (agent of knowledge). As instructors, developing a pedagogical strategy includes shaping the student's capacity to think and critically engage the discipline such that "facts" and "truths" are constantly coming into question (Gunder, 2004). Instruction involves the transmission of discourses and theoretical orientations given the pre-existing nomenclature maintained by the discipline. Given this position, among other factors, the instructor maintains a position of power that exerts itself in the student/teacher relationship. However, this power does not suggest an intentional act of the instructor; rather, the instructor operates as a mediating agent of knowledge (p. 307) that invites conflict and difference. Empowerment signifies a minimization of power relations that invites the voices of the other. Student empowerment provides a voice for perspectives commonly suppressed. As such, critical thinking becomes critical discussion.

What "truths" are we interpreting and critiquing? Another significant piece to the puzzle involves the role of diversity within the pedagogy. As Harkins and Wells reveal, the conflict "revolved around a cultural difference in meaning" (p. 44). In addition, "minority students began to voice how frustrated they were that people did not try to understand them" (p. 46). These statements are illuminating for two reasons: first, given that the other is excluded from the dominant discourse, the other's emergence threatens the power and authority provided to the discourse. As a consequence, the other is marginalized and disenfranchised. Second, implicit structures within this difference include a mediating space between what is acknowledged and what is suppressed. Out of this pathos of distance (Nietzsche, 2004), students "explore[d] the relationship between culture and fairness" (p. 45) that exposed difference and the other's exclusion. Given their exploration, students both learned and experienced diversity through personal and cultural reflection. In addition, students demonstrated critical thinking given their realization that classroom conflicts are applicable to real-life experiences while understanding the complexity of conflicts.

It follows that Harkins and Wells' critical pedagogy necessitates the logical conjunction of empowerment *and* critical thinking. I use the term *logical conjunction* to signify their conceptual equivalence of importance. Harkins and Wells identified the presence of cultural difference even in small situations. As such, given the empowered voices of the other, new perspectives were included into the discourse. If the new voices were not included, new perspectives may remain suppressed given that "[m]any students in the course had not been exposed to diversity in their home communities and may have lacked understanding of how diversity issues can impact conflicts" (p. 46). As such, how does a student find the "most factual facts and truthful truths—and then [. . .] ask questions about them" (p. 77) when the only "truths" and "facts" known exclude the other and therefore operate as a closed system?

The second point I would like to address involves DeCesare's use of "active learning." DeCesare states: "[r]equiring 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

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the instructor)” (p. 74). Does active learning promote obedience to the instructor? The short answer is no. In fact, it teaches the opposite of obedience. It teaches students to engage in the democratic process and brings one’s beliefs into question for open and rational discussion. Similar to the issue of empowerment, I agree that active learning does not *teach* critical thinking; rather, it parallels critical thinking as a consequence of critical pedagogy by reducing power dynamics (Morely, 2000) and increasing awareness through the development of skills that challenges prejudicial assumptions (Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Collins, 2005).

How does active learning complete this task? Active learning stages situations that imitate social and political conflicts. These situations present both objectively accepted theoretical positions and democratic space to reflect upon and challenge theory. Harkins and Wells argue that the use of standardization tools (i.e. weekly quizzes) function to “teach students questioning, diversity, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution” (p. 47). As such, active learning and standardization tools reify objective knowledge claims with practical discourse. Accordingly, Harkins and Wells structured the class such that “students learn how to [...] engage in the discourse of democracy, social justice, and empowerment. It means practicing a pedagogy that rejects authoritarian approaches that would promote silencing and oppression” (p. 48). The democratic discourse, therefore, operates to simultaneously dismantle and reconstruct objective knowledge claims in the service of openness to other perspectives. Due to the active learning approach in critical pedagogy, students brought into question the course structure rather than accepting requirements mandated by the instructor.

IV.

Final Thought

Increasingly, modern society is developing a greater need for understanding diversity. This need for understanding involves perspective-sharing and recognition of the other. Recognition derives from the individual’s exposure to others’ cultural, social, and political position. Facilitating exposure to the other requires gradual steps that integrate personal perspectives with those of other cultures. In this fusion of perspectives, differences are brought into rational discourse and critical analysis.

Critical pedagogy mediates difference. Critical pedagogy broadens the scope of perspectives presented in the classroom. Diverse perspectives are introduced given that students are empowered to voice their position on the topic as informed by culture. In addition, given that students are engaged in active learning, students gain a broader understanding of the way social, political, and cultural issues shape one’s viewpoint and personal experience. Finally, critical pedagogy resolves power differentials between paradigms.

As such, critical thinking evolves out of one’s consideration for the values upheld by structural paradigms and evaluate to against other paradigms. Contrary to DeCesare’s argument, critical thinking, as associated with critical pedagogy, is not about questioning “facts” and “truths”; rather, critical thinking enables the deconstruction and reconstruction of systems. However, reconstruction involves inclusion and assimilation. As Cho and Lewis (2005) adequately state, “Education, then, is the struggle to keep open the openness of the teacher/student relationship (p. 9).” Given this “openness,” students are empowered to critically voice their critical thoughts. When students have a voice, the “possibility of new possibilities” (Den Heyer, 2009) is endless.

What is critical thinking without a voice to contribute to the discourse?

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