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Rethinking Critical Thinking: A Relational and Contextual Approach

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Keywords

critical thinking, critical pedagogy, psychology, psychoanalysis, desire, social theory, ethics

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Matthew H. Bowker¹ and K. Patrick Fazioli²

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Critical thinking has become one of the most popular ideals in American education. Yet despite the ubiquity of the term on course syllabi, program descriptions, and mission statements, scholars remain sharply divided over the definition of the concept. What exactly does "critical thinking" mean? What distinguishes critical thinking from other forms of thinking? How can teachers "teach" critical thinking and how can we assess whether students are actually thinking critically?

Introduction and Historical Overview

The "critical thinking" construct rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century as part of a concerted national effort to foster civic responsibility, economic efficiency, and psychological fulfillment among the American public (Educational Policies Commission, 1938).

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Not only would the modern American critical thinker be able to use inductive inference to make sensible judgments in his personal, professional, and civic life, but he would also be immune to the lure of fascist, communist, and other anti-democratic propaganda (Glaser, 1942; Anderson et al., 1944). E.M. Glaser, for instance, maintained that “the study of the development of ability to think critically is concerned with a much larger problem – the problem of how American schools can educate more effectively for responsible and competent citizenship in our representative democracy” (1942, 409). And in 1939, Wayland Osborn wrote that “today the school is being increasingly called upon to teach resistance to propaganda. Social studies teachers in particular are expected to develop in their pupils habits of critical thinking with respect to controversial social issues. If social studies teachers aim to immunize their pupils against propaganda, they must organize effective curricular materials for classroom use.” (1)

Over the subsequent decades, the notion of critical thinking came to mean systematically analyzing arguments, avoiding logical fallacies, adhering to the rules of logic, and (where possible) applying the scientific method (Ennis, 1962; McPeck, 1981; Paul, 1984; Siegel, 1991). While there are numerous definitions of critical thinking within this context, the pithiest is offered by Robert Ennis (1996): Critical thinking is “reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 166).

This conception of critical thinking (what may be referred to as the ‘First Wave’) remains the most popular approach among contemporary educators, although it has not been without its critics. Perhaps the most vocal criticism of the idea of critical thinking as rational argumentation has arisen from the Critical Pedagogy movement, whose distinct understanding of “criticality” can be traced to the group of social theorists heavily influenced by Marx and Freud known as the Frankfurt School (see e.g., Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse, 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Adorno, 1973). The theorists of the Frankfurt School saw in the modern ideals of Reason, Logic, and Science not the pursuit of objective truth but political ideologies, that is, instruments of power wielded by economic and political institutions. In the same vein, for Critical Pedagogues, critical thinking has less to do with pursuing rational or logical perfection than with interrogating and resisting oppressive aspects of the dominant social, political, and economic orders. For example, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* — widely regarded as the seminal text of this movement — Paulo Freire offers a strikingly “political” definition of critical thinking as “thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them... thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (2000, p. 92).

Advocates of the Critical Pedagogy movement such as Henry Giroux (1978) and Laura Kaplan (1991) have criticized the First Wave conception of critical thinking as profoundly uncritical, both in its idealization of disembodied reason and logic, and in its apparent encouragement of political conformity. Far more skeptical of the universal validity of Reason and the necessity of heeding scientific (or social-scientific) truth claims, ‘Second Wave’ figures, in keeping with Max Weber’s (2002) distinction between *Zweckrationalität* and *Wertrationalität*, understand critical thinking not merely as *instrumental* thinking (i.e., finding the most effective means to achieve a given end), but as *value-laden* or ends-oriented thinking that addresses itself to issues like justice and equality. For example, Marianna Papastephanou and Charoula Angeli (2007) argue that critical thinking is more about the “problematization” of what has been “taken

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for granted” than about the means of “solving problematic situations or impasses within the system” (p. 613). Over the past several decades, First and Second Wave thinkers have engaged in an acrimonious debate over the nature and purpose of critical thinking, with each side accusing the other of being insufficiently critical.

Despite intense debates over the nature and purpose of critical thinking, we have found a surprising consensus regarding the notion that critical thinking should be an institution-wide (and even nation-wide) educational goal, implemented across curricula and pursued in most if not all courses of study. We disagree with this widely-held assumption, for there seems to be little reason or evidence to suggest that critical thinking holds equal applicability across academic disciplines. Indeed, in many cases — for instance, in a course on mathematics or organic chemistry — the amount of time a student devotes to developing critical thinking-relationships may be less than in other courses, for more time may be reserved for learning to apply the standards, practices, and procedures of a discipline with skill and precision. Such a claim is in no way meant to denigrate the importance or complexity of fields like mathematics or chemistry. It is, rather, to say that students of all subjects are best-served by attending to several forms of thinking-training: not only critical thinking but scientific thinking, analytical thinking, mathematical thinking, theory-to-practice thinking, and so on.

The demand that critical thinking be omnipresent in education has been a significant cause of the depletion of the *meaning* of critical thinking, for, if critical thinking must apply to every course, then it must remain vague and ill-defined. At the same time, the pretense that critical thinking is easily taught and can be applied in all areas lends a false aura of criticality to many quite *uncritical* teaching and learning practices, sometimes undertaken by those with little or no training or scholarly interest in critical thinking themselves. The following discussion is therefore limited to the domain of instruction in critical thinking and to academic courses and curricular activities where the development of critical thinking is a primary objective. To the extent that critical thinking is or ought to be a pedagogical goal, as in many core curricula, in several disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences, in advanced graduate training, and the like, we hope the following exploration of the relational and contextual dynamics of critical thinking will prove useful.

A Relational Definition of Critical Thinking

Perhaps the most common modern pedagogical paradigm is that referred to by Paulo Freire as the “banking concept of education” (2000). According to the “banking concept,” the teacher is imagined to “deposit” knowledge into the empty minds of students, who, over time, increase their cognitive “accounts” and, ultimately, leverage their intellectual “capital” against academic or everyday problems. For several decades, this paradigm has been critiqued as pedagogically and philosophically untenable, for it consigns the student to a passive role and the teacher to an authoritarian one, while equating the process of learning with thoughtless ingestion or consumption.

But in spite of educators’ trenchant criticism of and attempts to reform this paradigm, traces of the basic assumptions of the banking concept have remained in force. Throughout contemporary literatures on critical thinking, for instance, one finds the assertion that a primary

(sometimes *the* primary) benefit of critical thinking is that its “value” will be retained by the student after the academic year ends (see e.g., Foundation for critical thinking, 2013; hooks, 2010). The “value” of critical thinking is imagined to have a “long-term yield” because critical thinking is currently understood as a bundle of critical knowledge, skills, and attitudes (McClune & Jarman, 2010). Even if this bundle comes to be instilled in the student in the most progressive or innovative ways — through student-led projects, experiential learning, or critical reflection exercises — the metaphor that students must “bank” a bundle of critical knowledge, skills, and attitudes remains intact. For example, and perhaps ironically, a recent Wall Street Journal article reports that mentions of “critical thinking” in corporate employers’ job postings have doubled since 2009, while in a typical interview for the global banking firm Goldman Sachs, job candidates are asked “to assess company valuations and stock pitches and then to explain how they arrived at their conclusions.” Michael Desmarais, Head of Recruiting, explains that “by the end of one of those exercises, the candidates should have displayed whether they possess critical thinking” (Korn, 2014).

Such traces of the banking concept prove to be particularly unhelpful in the domain of critical thinking pedagogy, where teachers seek that students develop the *capacity* for critical thinking. To view critical thinking as a capacity is to recognize the relationship between an individual’s ability to think critically and the organization of relationships in that individual’s inner world. The capacity to think critically depends upon the individual’s achievement of an intellectual and psychological self-organization in which she is able to discover a form of autonomy within her relationships to her own thinking-habits, assumptions, and thought-objects. A pedagogical paradigm focused on developing the student’s *capacity* to think critically, therefore, differs radically from one devoted to training the students to adopt a set of “critical” knowledge, and skills, and attitudes. The latter approach suggests that critical thinking is essentially a *learned behavior* that, if successfully assimilated, may be repeated and re-applied by the individual.

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes, when conceived of as bundles or modules to be transmitted to and retained by the student, have very little to do with the student’s capacity to achieve the kind of flexibility and autonomy in psychic organization required for critical thinking. We might compare, for instance, the case of the pedagogical goal of creativity. It is widely recognized that, although creative artists, for instance, may develop their capacities through study, research, and practice, a teacher can not simply “teach creativity” or “produce creative thinkers” by providing students with a bundle of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are equivalent to “being creative” or that yield “creative thinking.” What is needed in a pedagogy of creativity is the facilitated development, enhancement, and renewal of the student’s psychic relationships such that the student finds the means to make contact with, and act upon, express, and give form to her authentic, spontaneous, creative impulses.¹

Similarly, what is needed in the case of critical thinking is the development, enhancement, or renewal of what we call the individual’s thinking-relationships. Christopher Bollas (1987) has famously suggested the category of the “unthought known” to describe that which is never cognitively processed but nevertheless becomes a person’s basic orientation to self and to life (pp. 277-283). Bollas’ argument is that, at the level of inner experience, we may “know” something without ever having thought about it. It may be incorporated so completely

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in our basic intellectual and emotional frameworks that it can only be continually rediscovered (repeated) in our experience. To imagine that an individual can simply apply learned methods or behaviors in order to “think” about his “unthought known” would be to seriously underestimate the difficulty and complexity of this task. And yet, this is a significant part of the task of critical thinking, such that we may even say that critical thinking must inevitably address “the unthought known” as one of its primary targets.

Given the complexity of the task of critical thinking, we find it most helpful to conceive of thinking — and critical thinking — in the language of *relating*. Approaching thinking as relating permits us to focus on the *capacity* to think critically and to consider how it may be most effectively facilitated, while allowing us to apply lessons from social philosophy and psychoanalytic theory to the field of critical thinking pedagogy and practice.

We propose, therefore, that critical thinking be defined as the capacity to develop flexible and autonomous thinking-relationships not only with the objects of one’s thought, but with one’s own thinking-relationships. That is, if a person (P) thinks about a thought-object (O), P may think about O in several ways: reasonably or unreasonably, scientifically or unscientifically, hastily or thoroughly. But, *more importantly*, when P thinks about O , she develops what we call a “thinking-relationship” with O that may be expressed as $P \rightarrow O$. This “thinking-relationship,” naturally, may be characterized by her habitual relationships to thought-objects like O , or by her enjoyment of topics related to O , or by her fears related to the possible manifestations of O . At the same time, her thinking-relationship with O is interwoven with her many other thinking-relationships to other objects of thought (e.g., $P \rightarrow O_2$, $P \rightarrow O_3$, etc.). Critical thinking, then, is the activity of *thinking about one’s own thinking-relationships*, such that P thinks about her thinking-relationship, $P \rightarrow O$, and then, very likely, $P \rightarrow O_2$, $P \rightarrow O_3$, and so on. This formulation of critical thinking may be expressed symbolically as $P \rightarrow [P \rightarrow O]$.

We believe this definition is both distinct and more exact than Elder & Paul’s (2012) well-known summary of critical thinking as “thinking about thinking” (see also Kuhn, 1999; Halpern, 1998). If, as we argue, thinking may be analogized with a relationship, then critical thinking may be understood as the activity of continuously renewing the relationships between the thinker and his thinking-relationships, such that his thinking-relationships are transformed into thought-objects, themselves. To be able to think about one’s thinking-relationships requires that one develop a particular kind of relationship with one’s relationships to thought-objects. That is, one’s relationships to thought-objects may be governed, as we have suggested, by tradition, or by experience, or by what one was taught in grammar school, or by prejudice. To think about one’s thinking-relationships means to stand in relation to them in such a way that one may examine their sources, their tendencies and patterns, and the motivations, desires, fears, and fantasies operating in them. If establishing, or attempting to establish, such a relationship with one’s own thinking-relationships is fraught with danger (the danger, perhaps, of uncovering an undesirable truth about one’s own thinking, or the danger of betraying a thinking-relationship that has proven useful in one’s life, or the danger of losing connection with a special object of thought, etc.) then the individual’s capacity to think critically will be severely restricted.

Thinking-Relationships in Context

The critical thinking-relationship we have described above is inextricable from the contexts of pedagogical relationships between teachers, students, and learning institutions. Teachers, students, and learning institutions, of course, relate to each other in a variety of ways: *physically*, by coming together regularly in a space that defines the group or class; *communicatively*, by way of the myriad oral and written communications that constitute the day-to-day work of courses, including class discussions, lectures, essays, assignments, examinations, etc.; *politically*, by operating within organizations whose dynamics are influenced by their missions, values, power-structures, financial needs, leaders, community partners, etc.; and *psychologically and intellectually*, in that teachers, students, and representatives of learning institutions possess and exchange desires, fears, fantasies, ideas, and opinions about themselves and about each other that affect pedagogical relationships in often unseen yet powerful ways.

Since teachers and students establish profound and multifaceted relationships with each other in their coursework, it is easy to imagine the difference between (a) a teacher-student relationship that facilitates the student's potential thinking-relationships and (b) a teacher-student relationship that obstructs or circumvents the student's potential thinking-relationships. Let's imagine the thought-object in question to be Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A teacher who inserts himself between the student and the thought-object, such that the student can *only* think what the teacher thinks about *Hamlet*, prevents the student from developing an autonomous thinking-relationship with *Hamlet*.

This unfortunate scenario is equally imaginable in the case of the student's potential *critical* thinking-relationships. Here, we may imagine a teacher who permits the student to think about *Hamlet*, but who does not permit the student to think *about how she [the student] thinks* about *Hamlet*. Perhaps she is encouraged to read and reflect upon *Hamlet*, and it is left at that. Or perhaps she is permitted to form her own impressions of *Hamlet*, based, presumably, upon its connection with her other thought-objects and thinking-relationships, but is given no space, aid, or encouragement to undertake the work of reflecting upon or challenging these relationships or these impressions. In the language of relationships, the teacher, in this scenario, permits a relationship to develop between the student and the thought-object (*Hamlet*), but does not permit the student to develop the *critical* thinking-relationship between herself and her thinking-relationship to *Hamlet* and to thought-objects like *Hamlet*. That is, the teacher does not facilitate the student's critical relating to her own thinking-relationships.²

In the critical thinking pedagogy we advance here, the key is to ensure that the relationship between teacher and student facilitates rather than contravenes the relationships between the student and his thinking-relationships. It is not, as we hope to show, merely a matter of not intruding. The teacher must be an active facilitator, a provider, even a sort of conductor, such that the complex circuitry of a student's thinking-relationships may be examined, tested, and potentially re-wired without either overheating or shutting down.

As critical thinking-relationships are embedded within relationships between teachers, students, and learning institutions, these latter relationships must not be governed by exploitation or abuse if they are to serve the genuine interests of students. In what follows, we outline several risks in pedagogical relationships in the hope of drawing attention to ways in which the critical thinking endeavor may be disrupted by interfering desires, fears, or fantasies. It would be

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unfortunate, of course, if the following analyses were taken to be a suggestion that educators are selfish, thoughtless, or somehow disinterested in students' welfare. Quite often, the opposite is the case. Nevertheless, even individuals and groups with the best of intentions are subject to human social and psychological pressures, and it is the job of those responsible for facilitating critical thinking to recognize and address those pressures to serve students' genuine interests. In what follows, we undertake an examination of the teacher's and the student's relationships with each other, with the thought-objects of courses, with departmental and institutional priorities, and with their mutual desires, in order to reflect upon their dynamics and consequences in the domain of critical thinking.

Aggression and Defense

We begin by considering the likelihood that the broad consensus about the inherent value of critical thinking covers up an aggressiveness among scholars and teachers engaged with the issue. Certainly, the various "camps" of critical thinking scholars (some of which we have identified above) are invested in defending their interpretations of critical thinking and in accusing others' of being uncritical. Perhaps such behavior is no surprise; after all, when engaged with critical thinking, we are encouraged to be "on guard" against inadequate evidence, unproven assumptions, invalid proofs, and flawed arguments. We are exhorted to search out faults in thinking and to "look for trouble," in several senses.

"To think critically is always to be hostile," said Hannah Arendt (2013), perhaps mistaking critical thinking for that form of moral and political action that she glamorized (see Arendt, 1958), not without earning her share of criticism. The idea, popular in some circles, that critical thinking is not only incidentally contentious, but *is contentiousness itself*, makes the activity of critical thinking into an instinctively aggressive posture that may often be antithetical to the autonomous and flexible relationships to one's own thinking-relationships we have described above.

If the intellectual vigilance associated with critical thinking is really an expression of aggression or hostility, then critical thinking becomes a sort of weapon. And if critical thinking becomes a weapon, an understandable goal in critical thinking would be to ensure that the weapon is never pointed at the self, but is always pointed at someone else. As Michael S. Roth (2012) has recently argued, students (particularly in the Humanities) are regularly encouraged to be "critical unmaskers" who demonstrate their intelligence by identifying the flaws, limitations, and inconsistencies in others' arguments. While intelligent criticism and critique certainly have their place within and beyond the classroom, they can also serve the aggressive and sadistic purpose of taking "delight in being able to show that somebody else is not to be believed" (p. 235). Surely, it is not just students in the Humanities (and many other disciplines), but also their teachers who display this attitude in their courses and in their research. Needless to say, the image of turning a fearsome intellectual weapon upon others so as to avoid having it turned upon oneself contrasts sharply with the critical psychic organization we have described above: one that is capable of exploring the self's own thinking-relationships and of challenging assumptions and tendencies therein that no longer suit the individual's authentic needs and desires.

If critical thinking may be reduced to a hostile enterprise, then we must know from where such hostility derives. Since aggression is often mobilized in self-defense, we might consider the ways in which critical thinking threatens or is perceived to threaten the self. Shoshana Felman (1982), among others, has argued that knowledge and ignorance must be understood within the “structural dynamic” of pedagogical relationships, where they express not abundance and lack but, rather, a seeking of and resistance to knowledge (p. 30). Although the nature of psychological resistance is conceptualized differently by various schools of psychology, in every case resistance protects something vital to the self. One who seeks to challenge or break down resistance, then, can not fail to encounter aggression mounted in what is perceived to be self-protection or, in some cases, self-preservation. Teachers’ and students’ confrontations with their (shared) resistances to learning and thinking, which must be a part of developing a critical thinking-relationship to their thinking-relationships, will often occasion hostility and aggression by students and teachers alike, as fears may arise that cherished beliefs will not withstand critical scrutiny, or that humiliating intellectual flaws will be exposed for all to see.

Thus, Felman’s claim, that proper teaching involves the “creation of a new condition of knowledge — the creation of an original learning-disposition” (p. 31), is well-taken but somewhat misses the mark. For, if Felman is right that a resistance to thinking and learning is at the heart of the matter, then she is wrong to imagine that it is the *teacher’s* task to instill in the student “an original learning-disposition” that will help the student overcome such resistance. As Felman often compares the pedagogical relationship to the psycho-therapeutic one, we might imagine how inappropriate it would be for a therapist to attempt to instill in a patient any particular disposition, even one of ‘openness’ or ‘well-being’ or ‘mental health.’ Rather, the task of the therapist must be to facilitate the process by which the patient, herself, explores, discovers, and creates (or re-creates) her own authentic disposition. Teachers of critical thinking who, with the best of intentions, see it as their task to instill “an original learning-disposition” or “a critical thinking disposition” or, in some other way, to defeat students’ resistances to thinking are overstepping their limits and powers. Such teachers are almost certain to entrench the resistances and activate the defenses of students who must now protect themselves against what can only be perceived as a kind of assault by the teacher upon the student’s current state of thinking and being.

Unlike Felman’s, Jacques Rancière’s (1991) critique of education is focused on the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, where the former is assumed to be all-knowing and the latter ignorant. The traditional educational process by which the teacher regulates what students are exposed to, gradually revealing his knowledge through the process of “explanation,” makes students helplessly dependent on the teacher because “to explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself” (p. 6). The goal for Rancière, as for Freire, and indeed for Felman, is to cultivate a pedagogical relationship in which the teacher demands that students respect the powers of their own intellects, “to make emancipated and emancipating men” (p. 101). Unlike traditional (hierarchical) educational relationships, Rancière’s ideal teacher would teach without assuming the possession and transmission of knowledge.

Rancière’s critique of the power-structure behind the “banking concept” of education discussed earlier is well-made, but even if the power-disparity between teacher and student were

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minimized by a teacher's refusal to presume knowledge — and it is not clear that this refusal would have this effect — students who perceive that they are being “ma[d]e” by a teacher into a certain kind of person, even an “emancipated and emancipating” one, are just as likely to raise their defenses and mount resistances as against an authoritarian figure. Indeed, students may find the teacher who pretends not to know to be more threatening because her expectations, demands, and methods are mysterious.

One of the most difficult paradoxes of teaching critical thinking is that, if students undertake the work of critical thinking because they have acceded to the will of the teacher, then they have given up something vital to the process of critical thinking, itself: namely, the development of an autonomous relationship to their own thinking-relationships. That is, a student who thinks critically because he is told to do so is no longer able to think critically about that command or his willingness to obey it. In this way, teaching critical thinking reminds us of the double-bind of enjoining someone to “think for himself.” If the student obeys the command, then, by definition, he is not thinking for himself. But if he refuses the command to think for himself, then he is left no alternative but *not* to think for himself. That is, teachers who attempt to “create” in the student a new disposition, or who in insidious ways attempt to “change” students' beliefs or dispositions will be (rightly) perceived as aggressors seeking to alter or restructure students' own psychic organizations, which is an attack on how they think, how they feel, and who they are.

Narcissism and Degradation

Despite the significant differences in the First and Second Wave conceptualizations of critical thinking, nearly all literatures of critical thinking agree that students are *deficient* in some manner. The assumption that the student is flawed in some significant way is implicit in many educational discourses, simply by way of the suggestion that it is the teacher's duty to change the student for the better. In many discussions of critical thinking, the primary flaws of students involve their susceptibility to being misled by fallacious arguments, by persuasive but ultimately intellectually bankrupt material (like advertisements), by conventional wisdom, by the influence of tradition or authority, by emotional appeals and *ad hominem* attacks, and the like.

For ‘First Wave’ critical pedagogues, such flaws prevent students from discovering the reasonable or objective truth. For Critical Pedagogues, these flaws prevent students from piercing the veil of political and economic ideology that masks fundamental injustices in the social order. In both cases, the goal of critical thinking is imagined to be the correction of such deficiencies in students, thereby allowing them to perceive the world “as it actually is.” As Burbules & Berk (1999) note, both traditional critical thinking theories and critical pedagogies are premised on the teacher's ability to direct students “to overcome ignorance, to test the distorted against the true, to ground effective human action in an accurate sense of social reality” (p. 53).

Today, both within the domain of critical thinking and without, concerns about “student narcissism” abound. The latest generation of college students, sometimes known as “millennials,” or, as Jean Twenge (2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009) calls them, members of “Generation Me” are frequently described as uniquely “narcissistic.” Unfortunately, for Twenge

and others, “narcissism” has lost its analytic precision and has come to be confused with excessive self-love and self-centeredness. Contrary to its popular usage, however, narcissism actually denotes a self-experience of profound loss and emptiness, such that the narcissistic individual must constantly make up for the tremendous deficiencies she finds in herself; hence, the over-compensating displays of grandiosity, the need for constant positive recognition by others, and the desperate acquisition of marks or trappings of elite status (see Lasch, 1979).

Popular yet inaccurate diagnoses of widespread “narcissism” have coincided with characterizations of today’s students as lacking “grit” (Duckworth et al., 2007). The “grit” argument claims that young people, over-indulged by permissive parents and relaxed cultural standards, require more rigorous training in toughness and self-control if they are to master the painful experiences of life and work. Calls for increased “grit” cohere with the accusations of narcissism in that they both claim that today’s young people lack the toughness needed to survive in an exacting adult world that demands humility, pain, and sacrifice in order to accomplish meaningful goals.

One wonders, of course, whether the exacting and painful vision of the adult world held up by these scholars as ‘reality’ is not, in fact, a cruel fantasy in which young people must be made to suffer, perhaps in the same ways that earlier generations have suffered or have imagined themselves to have suffered. Indeed, the imagination of students as narcissistic and lacking grit would seem to suggest that the solution to today’s putative “youth crisis” lies in increased harshness, in the steady deprivation of kindness, nurturing, indulgence, or care. This line of thinking would seem to threaten students with a world of pain and misery, to which they must become accustomed now, or else face even greater pain and misery later.

But the logic upon which such arguments rely is not defensible. As Heinz Kohut (1971) noted, difficulties in school or work, that is, difficulties in mobilizing effort toward defined goals, are not the result of excessive self-esteem but the opposite: “Many of the most severe and chronic work disturbances,” he argues, are “due to the fact that the self is poorly cathected with narcissistic libido and in chronic danger of fragmentation” (p. 120). Part of the reason for this — a full account of which is beyond the scope of this paper — involves the fact that self-regard, self-respect and self-love are healthy parts of the development of a person. And a person, even a developing person, has the capacity to set goals relating to study or work that are (at least partly) self-generated and self-endorsed, rather than painful, alienating impingements. The difference between these two types of experiences is considerable: If there is “a living self in depth [that] has become the organizing center of the ego’s activities,” then the individual’s work is “undertaken on his own initiative rather than as if by a passively obedient automaton, . . . [with] some originality rather than being humdrum and routine” (p. 120).

To understand why educators, in particular, would be so quick to embrace the idea that students are flawed — and not merely flawed by ignorance but deficient in some essential aspects of their character — we must recognize that the narcissistic dilemma being described is one faced *not* by students but by teachers, and when faced with a narcissistic dilemma, the degradation of others and the aggrandizement of the self are often two sides of the same coin. That is, our work with students makes students easy to exploit in a situation where educators and

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educational institutions are increasingly confronted with severe “losses” (of resources, of personnel, of prestige) and increasingly experience themselves as “empty” of value.

The educational vocation has suffered from a great many blows to its esteem in recent decades. Today’s teachers practice in a climate that often devalues their work, in spite of the lip service regularly paid to the importance of teachers by politicians running for elected office. Consider, first, learning institutions’ own statements of their priorities, which frequently center upon the promise that the institution will prepare the student for the day when she will finally enter “the real world,” which lies, of course, “beyond the campus walls.” Indeed, the advertising slogan of a college in New York State proclaims to prospective students: “*When you’re here, you’re almost there*” (D’Youville College website, 2015). This curious notion, that when a student is “here,” at the college, he is, in effect, *nowhere*, reminds us that even educators may be complicit in reproducing a vision of the learning institution as a place somehow outside of “real life,” a place from where one must emerge in order to arrive *somewhere*. Certainly, the pejorative depiction of the university as an “Ivory Tower,” now almost universally rejected by educators as the most undesirable of portrayals, figured students as prisoners locked away in impenetrable fortresses, surviving only on the consumption of dusty, old books and dead, stale ideas (see Bowker, 2012).

Low salaries, negative media portrayals, and disparaging public discourses about teaching and education are also part of the strained relationship between today’s learning institutions and “the real world.” This relationship, so far, has been one-sided, such that what happens in “the real world” confers value on the work of the learning institution, which must constantly adapt its practices to suit the changing needs of employers, the economy, governmental agencies, and the like. At an even more concrete level, educational institutions are today increasingly dependent upon monetary grants and awards, alumni donations, corporate gifts, and productive public relations campaigns just to assure their own financial survival. Thus, if learning institutions are empty or worthless unless they orient themselves toward and appeal to “the real world” that exists beyond their gates, then educators and teachers risk internalizing a very negative self-attribution of meaninglessness along with an implicit imperative to locate the value of academic work in its capacity to serve the needs of others.

In this context, one wonders whether the idea of teaching students to be critical thinkers offers educators a chance to renew their sense of value and purpose, a chance to relieve feelings of devaluation and degradation in their own eyes or in the eyes of peers, other professionals, and the broader public. If critical thinking is imagined to correct what, as we have argued above, is imagined to be flawed and deficient about students, particularly their self-possession and their contentment in false consciousness, then the case for critical thinking is a not merely case for liberating students from ignorance, but a case for correcting a dangerous social crisis, with wide-ranging impacts upon the national economy, politics, and culture. Teachers may, for instance, earn feelings of self-worth if they explicitly or implicitly recruit students to social causes or humanitarian ideologies that are believed to “make a difference” in “the real world.”

What is more, such exploitation of students may be rationalized if students are imagined to be inherently flawed, “narcissistic,” or lazy. In fact, while it remains surprising when dedicated educators disparage students, we may now see that such disparagement may actually

help bolster an educator's sense of her own importance and efficacy. Of course, if critical thinking platforms are used to serve teachers' and learning institutions' desires to feel valued in this way, then they degrade and exploit students while pretending to offer students enlightenment, and, in so doing, undermine the genuinely critical capacities of students.

The Denial of Desire and the Desire of the Other

The adjective "critical" lends a special aura of superiority to the noun "thinking," such that — whether critical thinking be construed as logical thinking or as politically liberatory thinking — the term often functions to conceal the presence of the teacher's or the learning institution's desires, some of which we have just discussed. Most if not all critical thinking discourses have colluded in imagining a privileged category of thinking, the unconscious goal of which is to disavow the presence of desire by attending to (and often becoming preoccupied with) the ostensibly rigorous standards required to earn the "critical" seal of approval. The consensus that we must teach critical thinking at every opportunity has created a situation in which the practice of critical thinking is overrun by the unacknowledged desires and fantasies of researchers, teachers, administrators, governmental agencies, and other related organizations.

Put another way, the current discourses of critical thinking permit teachers, learning institutions, and students to participate in the fantasy that there can be a kind of thinking without desire: a pure and innocent thinking. If we recall the metaphor of thinking as relating, then we can see why this fantasy is so attractive. The idea that it is possible for an individual to relate to a thought-object without the interference of desire entails the idea that the individual may relate to the thought-object "objectively," may comprehend the thought-object "in itself" or "just as it is." The desire to relate to a thought-object in this way derives from the desire to psychologically identify with or incorporate the thought-object in its pure and uncorrupted form. That is, the desire to relate to thought-objects purely and innocently means, at the level of psychic experience, the desire to identify with and incorporate things "as they are," things that are inherently true, natural, correct, or right. Ironically, the desire to think about an object "just as it is" is really a desire *not* to think about it at all, but to establish an im-mediate (i.e., *not* mediated by thought) relationship with it. In psychoanalytic language, this desire would be expressed as the desire to merge or fuse with an object. Merger or fusion is desired because it seems to offer the individual a way to make contact with or incorporate the desirable aspects or qualities of the object. This suggests that two of the fundamental desires driving the critical thinking movement are the desire to avoid thought, and the desire to cover up that desire by imagining critical thinking as pure and uncorrupted by desire.

This complex paradox deserves more explanation. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the philosophical and scientific traditions surrounding the idea of the 'thing-in-itself,' it is easy to see that, if it were possible to make contact with a thing-in-itself, then imagining the thing or thinking about the thing might risk departing from its essential reality. As the Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne (1993) would put it, the mind treats each of its objects "not according to the nature of the thing, but in accordance with itself. Things in themselves perhaps have their own weights, measures, and states; but inwardly, when they enter into us, the mind cuts them to its own conceptions" (p. 131). Today — and quite frequently in the five centuries between the time of Montaigne's writing and today — there is a similar trend

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in social theory to view “reality” as precisely that which can not be thought. An entire tradition of postmodern thinkers would agree that ‘the Real’ is inaccessible to thought and language and, therefore, what is real is “a kind of ontological ‘collateral damage’ of symbolic operations: the process of symbolization is inherently thwarted, doomed to fail, and the Real *is* this immanent failure of the symbolic” (Žižek, 2012, p. 959).

Thinking, for writers old and new, means preferring what pertains to the mind to what pertains to reality, nature, and things-in-themselves. The danger of thinking is that the thinking mind, like Narcissus, falls in love with its own reflection and drowns in its own image, finding nothing so engaging as itself. In keeping with this metaphor, Montaigne’s depictions of the activity of thought typically emphasize its self-devouring, morbid quality. For instance, he writes famously that the situation of the thinking mind “is much like that of Aesop’s dogs who, seeing something like a dead body floating in the sea, and being unable to get near it, set about drinking up the water to make a dry passage, and choked themselves” (1993, pp. 347-348).

The point of this brief excursus on anti-thinking currents in the Western tradition of philosophy is to recall that one of the uses to which the discourse of critical thinking has been put is to support a fantasy of a superior form of thinking, sanitized of emotion, bias, or desire. By imagining itself un beholden to self-oriented desires, critical thinking is presumed to make contact with what is real and true.

If the critical thinking discourse offers a way to imagine a form of thinking that is pure and free of desire, why should this hiding of desire be necessary? That is, what is the denied desire? We have already suggested that a fundamental denied desire is the desire not to think but to identify with or merge with “things-in-themselves,” in order to incorporate their “truth value,” as it were. We must also consider the problematic of desire formulated by Jacques Lacan (1977), for if Lacan is correct, then all participants involved in the critical endeavor have struggled, since childhood, with deciphering and fulfilling what others desire. The developing person asks, *Che vuoi?, or What do you want (from me)?*, yet finds that what is desired is never quite clear. His only relief from this frustration is the hope that one day he will figure out *exactly* what is desired of him, satisfy those desires, make others happy, and therefore become happy himself.

The logic of the hopeful yet tragic “desire of the Other,” when vastly simplified, suggests that individuals adopt other’s desires as their own and that individuals assume the role or duty of striving to satisfy the other’s desire, both of which efforts are directed at becoming the object of desire of the other. Since one of our most basic (although often unconscious) desires is to fulfill what others desire, most of us have developed highly perceptive sensory apparatuses to discern what others like and dislike, lack, and need. If a parent seems to lack a sympathizer in her beliefs about governmental regulation, or if a teacher seems to lack enthusiastic students in helping him create a community-service project, then this perceived need, this perceived desire, suggests to the child or the student an opportunity to repeat a pattern of working to satisfy the desire of the other.

Whether the teacher makes his desires clear or hides them, and whether the student is aware of her desire to fulfill the teacher’s desire or not, how can a student develop a genuine, authentic, and creative relationship between herself and her own thinking-relationships if she

must contend with — but never consciously confront — the effects that the interaction of her desires and the teacher’s desires have upon her? The student in such a situation is now concerned with managing a very different relationship than the one described by critical thinking: She must navigate the relationship between herself and the teacher and must use her own relationship with thought-objects *not* as a foundation for the critical examination of her own thinking-relationships but as a means to navigate the desire of the other.

Earlier, we discussed some of the ways in which a teacher may use critical thinking to hide a personal or institutional agenda. If it becomes clear (although likely not explicit) that the teacher desires that the students *pretend* to think critically while actually supporting the agenda of the teacher, then a student’s compliant reaction would indicate not critical thinking but merely obedient behavior, while a student’s negative reaction may appear to be a refusal of critical thinking when it is, in fact, a rebellion against being used by the teacher, an expression of autonomy and independence from the teacher. While the latter response seems preferable, neither permits the student to engage in genuinely critical thinking.

Similarly, the teacher who feels that her role is to give students what she perceives the student to desire — which may or may not be the actual desires of students and which may or may not be in the students’ best interests — is primarily concerned with obtaining evidence that she has, in fact, satisfied the students’ desires so that she can be satisfied. Specifically, she may desire to possess that which she believes students to desire in her: knowledge, wit, charm, personality, the delivery of an enjoyable course, and the like. Even in the case of the dedicated and seemingly selfless teacher who “does everything” for students and “gives students exactly what they want,” we find that we are returned to the *teacher’s* desire to satisfy the desire of the other.

If a teacher fears that she is incapable of fulfilling students’ desires — and it is important to remember that none of us is certain that we are able to fulfill or even define the other’s desire — then she may react in any number of ways. She may continue to try to satisfy students’ desires by pandering to students, lowering course expectations, or focusing on being ‘entertaining’ and ‘fun.’ Alternatively, she may revisit her fear upon students by making students feel inadequate, by increasing the difficulty or severity of course assignments and assessments, by using the threat of low grades to cause student mental anguish, or even by explicitly or implicitly demeaning students who fail to meet expectations. In this context, these actions would be undertaken to protect the teacher from the pain and shame associated with her failure to fulfill the other’s desire.

While the disparagement of students serves as a defense against the student’s power to invalidate the teacher’s desirability, maligning students is also a convenient way to dismiss feelings of guilt about using students to serve desires, aims, and ends (some of which we have discussed above) that are not their own. If students are just lazy narcissists, if their desires are vain and pointless anyway, then teachers may feel justified in coercing or pressuring students in order to transform them into something that will satisfy someone’s desire (the desire of the Chairperson, or the Dean, the local employer, etc.).

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Of course, this dynamic is apparent in the actions and attitudes of students as well. If a student fears that he is incapable of fulfilling the teacher's desire, then the student may defend himself by withdrawing from the class environment, lagging behind on assignments, or cutting back on course preparation. In only slightly more extreme cases, the student may rebel by undercutting the teacher's efforts to lead a productive class, perhaps by interrupting the discussion with irrelevant comments, or by breaking into side conversations, or by means of similar diversions.

In some cases, students may feel so angry about their apparent inability to satisfy the teacher (and thus, to satisfy themselves) that they may openly reject the teacher and the course, claiming that either or both are irrelevant, uninteresting, or torturous. Of course, while these assessments may sometimes be accurate, they also likely reflect efforts to return an injury for an injury, since the student has suffered a blow to his esteem if he must admit that he is powerless to satisfy the teacher's desire. If he cannot be nor do what the teacher desires, if he cannot become the object of her desire, then, simply put, he feels undesirable. If, in return, the student seeks to make the teacher feel undesirable, it is not merely out of petty vengeance but out of the need to lessen the psychological injury he has suffered. If he is able to diminish the source of the injury to his esteem, if the teacher's opinion is irrelevant because the teacher herself is bad or foolish, then her rejection of the student is much less painful.

Conclusion: Critical Thinking and Ethical Practice

We have sought to illustrate several scenarios by which psychological pressures arising in the context of the relationships between teachers, students, and learning institutions can interfere with the student's capacity to engage in critical thinking. Although rarely if ever discussed in the literature of critical thinking, we believe that in order to facilitate critical thinking, both teacher and the student must be ready to confront and traverse the psychic territories of aggression, defense, desire, and fantasy. By the phrase, "confront and traverse... territories," we mean simply that the teacher and student must be willing and able to engage in the examination and possible re-construction of their thinking-relationships, and, by extension, their actual relationship to themselves and others in the world.

Authentically critical thinking-relationships can only be discovered once the underlying and often unconscious dynamics guiding existing thinking-relationships have been brought to light. This is, no doubt, a difficult undertaking, for both teacher and the student must be willing and able to look carefully at the arrangement of their inner worlds, arrangements which may be profoundly associated with individuals' senses of self, cherished beliefs, and connections to valued objects and ideals. It is therefore a matter of ethical consideration that teachers and educators take care to protect students from undue psychological anguish when teaching critical thinking. But this is not the only ethical ramification of the critical thinking endeavor as we have defined it. Our brief conclusion to this paper consists of a reflection upon the relationship between the ideals of critical thinking and those of ethical conduct, in order to show not only that teaching critical thinking is, inherently, an ethical matter, but also that at least one formulation of an ideal of ethical conduct entails the notion of critical thinking as we have defined it.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to define the contours of ethical agency, personhood, or subjectivity, or to undertake a lengthy exposition of the meaning of ethical conduct. Nevertheless, we may take steps toward elucidating the substantial connection between critical thinking and ethics if we recall a distinction we have already referred to above in distinguishing between a *capacity* to act and a *learned behavior*, and in differentiating a “a living self in depth [that] has become the organizing center of the ego’s activities,” from a person who operates as if he were “a passively obedient automaton” (Kohut, 1971, p. 120).

In his famous essay on liberty, Isaiah Berlin (1969) adds some helpful and familiar terms to this distinction under the aegis of the goal of attaining what he calls “positive freedom.” Berlin writes:

I wish to be a subject, not an object, to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer — deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them. . . . I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. (p. 131)

Because the discourses of subjectivity are so fraught with divisiveness over issues not pertaining to our concerns here, we propose to refer to the state of being endorsed by Berlin as personhood. To be a person, in a robust sense, signifies more than the possession of a human body; it refers to the ideal — which is never *absolutely* attainable — of being the author of one’s own thoughts and actions or “a center of initiative” in the world (Kohut, 1977, p. 99), rather than an object or a thing that reacts to actions taken by others. Psychologically-speaking, personhood begins not with a thought or a declaration of “*cogito ergo sum*” (Descartes, 1985), but with the “feeling of existing. . . as a basic place to operate from” (Winnicott, 1986, p. 39). This basic feeling of the self’s existence as “a unit, cohesive in space and enduring in time” (Kohut, 1977, p. 99) is an expression of the person’s integrity and security, an expression of the person’s wholeness and psychic boundaries.

Integrity and security — or wholeness and boundedness, which amount to the same thing — refer not only to the person’s inner world but to his relationship to others in the world outside. To be integrated means that one can contain within the self the various aspects of one’s own personality and need not compulsively project the undesirable ones onto others or assimilate from others what seems to be lacking in the self. Similarly, the ideal of secure self-boundaries means that one can relate with others without either becoming fused together with them or feeling impossibly separated from them. Thus, if a person is able to develop the “sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person,” he will “encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity” (Laing, 1969, 39).

We have already discussed the challenges associated with navigating the desires of the teacher and the learning institution (and the student’s desire to satisfy these desires) in relation to

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critical thinking. These challenges may be understood in relation to a useful distinction between moral and ethical conduct, drawn in various ways by psychodynamically-sensitive ethical theorists, such as Erik Erikson (1964), Lawrence Kohlberg (1973), Jessica Benjamin (1998), and David Levine (2004). If ‘moral’ conduct may be taken to refer to adherence to rules set by a moral group, and ‘ethical’ conduct may be understood as “the regard for others that becomes a part of our sense of our selves” (Levine, 2004, 29), that is, ethical regard for others derived from our own achievement of personhood, then the difference between moral and ethical conduct is considerable.

Moral conduct, following this definition, has to do with securing connection to a moral authority or group by adhering to its rules. What is “good” about moral conduct is *not* the nature of the action or even its effect upon others, but the degree to which it adheres to the rules and thereby affirms connection with the moral group. That is, “moral thinking tends to separate content from subjective function. The content of the rules does not much matter. What matters is adherence to them” (Levine, 2004, 49). The attention, in what we call ‘moral’ behavior, directed toward the group that defines the good, rather than the content of the conduct that may or may not be good, helps explain why individuals can commit horrific acts (such as the killing of innocents, the abuse of children, etc.) while experiencing themselves as morally “good,” for if these behaviors are expected or desired by the moral authority or moral group to which the individual belongs or desires to belong, then even the most hideous behavior may secure the sought-after connection.

On the contrary, ‘ethical’ conduct is an expression of the ethical quality or character of the person, and “instantiate[s] regard for the self and others in the interaction of persons” (Levine, 2004, 49). In ethical conduct, a person’s “secure self-boundaries form the basis for recognition of the boundaries of others,” just as “self-regard forms the basis for regard for others” (48). In many ways, these descriptions of ethical conduct echo Immanuel Kant’s (1981) ethical principle of the categorical imperative, which holds that an ethical subject must respect others’ freedom and autonomy because the subject respects her own. Unlike moral action, the value or “good” of ethical action resides not in following a rule or code, nor in associating oneself with an authority or group that gives the self its moral identity, but from the person’s affirmation of the very ideals and values the self has embraced in becoming a person. As such, the ethical activity of the person is to embody her own personhood and to safeguard the personhood of others by acting in ways that facilitate or at least do not negate others’ efforts to be or become integrated persons.

One of the greatest impediments to the achievement of both personhood and ethical conduct is the imposition of a moral code whereby the individual’s security and value are dependent upon adherence to a set of rules or codes established by an authority or group. Such rules and codes may be considered moral, even if they are not explicitly concerned with morality, because what comes to define the individual’s relation to “the good” is, once again, not the content of her conduct but her ability and willingness to comply with the norms of the group. The value of the individual, in this case, is equivalent to her belonging, her sameness, her ability to obtain the conditional approval of others (parents, peers, authorities, members of the group) by acting as they act. Likewise, her self-regard (her ability to feel “good” about herself) is

determined by how closely she can identify with the authority or group who are the holders of goodness.

This organization of the individual's inner world, which directs attention primarily toward the needs and desires of others, is what Winnicott (1965) refers to as the "false self." The actions of the "false self" are compliant with the desires of the other because compliance is promised to sustain a connection to them, a connection upon which the individual who has *not* achieved the ideal of personhood desperately depends. The actions of the false self, then, actually express the *non-being* of a person, since they turn the individual into an object of the other's desire for the sake of a connection that is defined as "the good," but that undermines the possibility that the individual become an integrated and secure person who embodies ethical character and who acts ethically for authentic and self-affirming reasons.

The critical thinking-relationship, then, is an ethical relationship, as the facilitation of critical thinking is an ethical endeavor. The student's critical thinking-relationships, like his thinking-relationships, may be influenced and shaped by interactions with others in a multitude of ways, but, ultimately, they are his own. In this sense, critical thinking can not be directly taught, but only facilitated. If a teacher of critical thinking defines critical thinking as "the good," and then lays out a set of rules, laws, or practices (or rituals) that must be followed in order for the student to attain the status of "critical thinker" and, thereby to hold the status of "good," then the teacher has created a moral group and a moral law. The teacher has placed the student in a difficult position where belonging to the *moral* group means complying with the rules and practices set forth by her, at the expense of the development of the student's *ethical* integrity as a thinker and a person.

Perhaps the greatest danger in secondary and higher education, and not only within the realm of critical thinking, is the temptation to consider education not as a project aimed at the enrichment of the student as an end in himself, but as a collective project of training or developing a "citizenry" or "labor force," in which students are viewed as means of satisfying learning institutions' needs, employers' demands, communities' goals, and the nation's political and economic aspirations (Bowker, 2012). Rather, for genuine critical thinking and ethical conduct to flourish, students must be offered environments in which they can safely yet freely explore, and, if necessary, challenge the pressures, desires, and demands that influence their thinking-relationships. In many respects, the critical thinking teacher must create something that resembles what Winnicott called a "holding environment" (1965), a space where students feel secure enough and free enough to undertake the difficult work detailed above. This environment must begin with a reassurance that the students will not be threatened, assaulted, or embarrassed by the teacher, by other students, or by the task of thinking critically. From this security arises students' ability to tolerate the frustrations and anxieties associated with critical examination.

Therefore, the first step toward a truly critical pedagogy would be an active and on-going process of reflection by the teacher based on the recognition that she must critically examine her use of students as targets or containers for her own desires, which would impair the student's ability to develop the new and complex thinking-relationships we have described. Facilitating critical thinking and its correlates in the student is a complex practice that begins with the criticality of teachers who must contend with their own thinking-relationships and interpersonal

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relationships before attempting to cultivate others'. If both the teacher's and the students' desires, pressures, and relationship-dynamics can be recognized consciously and examined critically, then they will hold less sway over the course group than if they are left unexamined or denied. Indeed, if desires, fantasies, and resistances can be encountered and critically thought about within the context of the course, they can serve as opportunities for the teacher to model and for the course group to engage in collective, authentic critical thinking.

Notes

¹ Throughout the paper, we use the term “facilitate” in its most robust sense and in connection with the Winnicottian tradition (1965). The facilitation of intellectual processes related to critical thinking is not passive, hands-off, or *laissez-faire*, or at least it is not necessarily so. Facilitation, in the sense in which we employ the term, may include periods of direct or intensive instruction, of listening, of questioning, or challenging, and more. What is key about facilitation, and the reason we use this term, is that when one facilitates, one facilitates the capacities of another, in this case the student. That is, the ideal of facilitation emphasizes the way that the student’s intellectual maturation — particularly in the case of critical thinking, which is all that we are concerned with in this paper — is related to the discovery of capacities and potentialities within the student, fostered and developed by the teacher and learning environment. The antipode of facilitation is impingement, which emphasizes external imposition upon the student and the disruption of the student’s thinking- and critical thinking-activities by external forces and with external thought-objects (see also Bowker 2016). While the two are always blended, it is important, we believe, to use the term, “facilitation” in relation to critical thinking, since it is especially important in this area to avoid impingement and to be attuned, responsive, and attentive to the student’s relationship to her own thinking-relationships.

² For instance, a fruitful but not technically *critical* instructional prompt in the case of *Hamlet* might be for the teacher to ask the student: “What do you think drives the primary tension in the drama?” Let us say the student replies: “I think Hamlet is indecisive because he still loves his mother.” The teacher then has an opportunity to facilitate a *critical* inquiry in several ways. For instance, the teacher may ask: “Why do you think you find Hamlet’s love for his mother to be so important to the drama?” This question prompts the student to reflect on her own associations and thought-objects and how they may shape her reactions to and interpretations of *Hamlet*. There are, of course, numerous means and methods of inspiring critical thinking, so long as we recall that the emphasis here is not on training the student to read or understand *Hamlet* ‘correctly,’ or in keeping with what other venerable interpreters have thought about *Hamlet*, but to direct her attention toward her own thinking-relationships. Some studies have even suggested that offering provocative declarative statements may be as effective or more effective in inspiring students to ask questions (see Bowker 2010). In this vein, an alternative to the critically-evocative question above may be simply to suggest to the student: “Perhaps the central tension driving the drama is Hamlet’s fear of becoming a murderer, and therefore, of becoming like Claudius, and therefore, of becoming morally akin to his own father’s murderer.” In the student’s response to this possibility, which, in the right environment, might include her defense of her own interpretation of the play and her view of the central importance of maternal love, the teacher may find equally productive material with which to work in directing the student to consider why she has chosen to construct the drama of *Hamlet* in the way that she has. Here, it is important to note once again, as we have noted throughout the paper, that promoting critical thinking is not the *only* responsibility of teaching, and that to teach *Hamlet* is not *only* about teaching the student to critically reflect upon her own interpretations of *Hamlet*. Since our purpose in this paper is to outline an admittedly exacting set of principles for facilitating genuinely critical thinking, we offer not a prescription for what all teachers of *Hamlet* must do, but merely an account of what critical thinking would look like if we were to take that pedagogical objective seriously, while remaining cognizant of its intellectual, relational, and

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psychodynamic correlates. In the imaginary dialogue offered above, the teacher does not necessarily forego instruction, direction, or even power vis-à-vis the student, nor does she rescind any rights to (re)turn to non-critical or extra-critical learning activities.

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