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## A Conversation with DeCesare: Toward Practical Definitions of Critical Thinking

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## ***A conversation with DeCesare: Toward practical definitions of critical thinking***

**Yvonne Wells<sup>1</sup> & Timothy Quinones<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract.** In response to conversations of Psychology teachers in Volume I of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* (2009), Michael DeCesare (2009) called for more specific definitions of the term “critical thinking.” DeCesare questioned methods of stimulating critical thinking in the classroom that might frustrate students of psychology without furthering their learning. DeCesare also appeared to view political realities in the academy as less relevant to the teaching of diversity courses than to the personal experiences of teachers. DeCesare seems to the present authors to believe that students should be moved or transformed to engage in social change through their courses in psychology. For DeCesare the process of learning facts appears to precede the process of critical thinking about psychology. Thus, the present authors have been presented with a challenge to show that there is a pedagogically practical and useful realm of “critical thinking” that can take place along with “factual,” empirical thinking in psychology. This paper, a conversation with DeCesare as he critiques the discourses presented in Volume I of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, presents some of the ways critical theorists have defined critical thinking. With this presentation, we introduce the perspectives of contributors to Volume II of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* as each advances his or her own functional ideas about definitions and methods of critical thinking in the teaching of psychology.

### **I.**

When Michael DeCesare (2009) called for clearer definitions of the term “critical thinking” as used by teachers of psychology in the first volume of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, the present authors were drawn into a discourse with a colleague in the field of psychology as teacher and student. “Critical thinking” has to be conceptualized more specifically. Such thinking in psychology stands as vague and multifarious (Hunt 2007). It must be conceptualized as an area of psychology in which even introductory psychology students can engage. The present authors realize that some terms used to describe “critical thinking” and the philosophical approach known as “Critical Theory” are so abstract that the critical process to which they refer can seem uninteresting or irrelevant to students of psychology. We agree with DeCesare that teachers of psychology have yet to agree on specific definitions of critical thinking and its practical application in psychology classrooms. DeCesare’s critiques of articles from *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* have excited us to join in an important discourse about the topic, and motivated our search for practical definitions.

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Proposing that methods of stimulating critical thinking in the classroom described by Harkins and Wells (2009) do more to “frustrate” students of psychology than to teach students about conflict, DeCesare (2009) summed up his idea of a critical thinking process very simply: Critical thinking is not a special process. It is merely having students learn a lot of the facts about their field, then think about what they have learned. Examining this deceptively simple definition of critical thinking, we turned to the idea of stimulating classroom conflicts by asking students to take the role of teachers and act as graders of a quiz about conflict, as proposed by Harkins and Wells. What were these teachers driving at when they directed students to observe the conflicts inherent in their own reaction to a class assignment involving taking the role, momentarily, of the teacher? The present authors have gathered through Harkins and Wells’ conversations about their methods, that conflicts in their courses on conflict and resolution represent dualistic interactions where students discover that empirically derived facts about conflicts do not tell enough about conflict to actually help resolve it. One conflict described in a classroom assignment asked students to take the role of a teacher and grade a quiz, then observe and discuss their own actions towards the person they graded. The method was based on the idea of a dialogue in the style of the ancient Greeks as described by Hunt (2007) in *The Story of Psychology*. Hunt has described a field of psychology that would come to reject dialogue and rational discourse in favor of empirical, scientifically guided methods for knowing the truth about human behavior. Ancient thinkers who appeared to be more interested in empirical, natural-science-based models of understanding truth and human behavior eventually came to be described by Hunt as the *prototypical psychologists*. Ancient critical thinkers like Socrates were silenced as far as purveyors of psychological truth. As Hunt described it, the field of psychology came to shed the philosophy of thought altogether.

We note today that the dualistic arguments between empirically derived and rationally debated aspects of psychology have never been resolved. The cyclical reoccurrence of arguments about what psychology should be and how it should apply to human life leaves Hunt (2007) and the rest of us to question whether or not there will ever be a coherent paradigm of human behavior, and to consider, as does Hunt, that there might not even be a need for such a paradigm in psychology. If this is the case, then where has empiricism actually led the field? Questions about the origin, ethics and the application of findings about psychology become even more important if we reason that the empirical search for truth is not likely to uncover any lasting reality in psychology which will not at some point be challenged by another perspective on the field.

Critical thinking is not proposed here as a path to a psychological paradigm. It is an area of thought that continues to grapple with the subtle and implied side of the dialogue of psychology. DeCesare (2009) worried that the understated and indirect conflicts presented by Harkins and Wells (2009) in courses on conflict resolution would be too difficult and frustrating for students to grasp. These conflicts might distract students from learning the facts. The present authors, however, propose that the everyday conflicts presented to students through a process of asking them to take the role of a teacher and reflect on observations about their behavior in that role can actually lead students to facts. Dialogues using real conflicts offer students a way to examine facts that they might not initially grasp—the subtle, implicit and symbolic aspects of conflicts.

Harkins and Wells’ (2009) conflict in the classroom presented a Piagetian form of disequilibrium to shake students and teachers out of stagnant ways of knowing. We assimilate old knowledge, and then accommodate our new ideas, but eventually we will

find that our knowledge obstructs us. We no longer “know” what we need to know to develop (Gruber & Voneche, 1977). We arrive at disequilibrium, conflict, and impasse in a natural course of development. However, we can be stimulated through involvement in critical discourse to realize and resolve conflicts in ways that theories and facts about conflicts could never stimulate us. Harkins and Wells did not sharply define the pedagogy in this course on conflict, but they attempted to show that it did not have to be a pedagogy based only on the instructions of experts on conflict. Raising conflict in a classroom is one of many forms of getting students to think critically. To get a sense of whether or not it “works,” we can look at the actual words of one student in an e-mail to one of the professors:

*“I don’t think you remember me, but I took your freshman seminar “Voices in Conflict.” I just wanted to say that everything you taught in that class has started to make sense for me, [a] couple years after...”*

Critical thinking methods might “sink in” after students have had a time to reflect on the methods. The present authors propose that such methods might be more memorable than specific definitions and methodological procedures that students might learn mainly by reading and memorizing. While reading and memorizing do not form the basis of study for all students, we believe that unique forms of pedagogy, specifically directed at critical thinking are worth naming and chronicling for teachers who might want to try them.

A roadmap to specific texts, films, and activities that fit with critical thinking in the classroom needs to be developed and specified. Authors in Volume II have tackled this. First, Mayo provides details about specific ways to bring critical pedagogy into the practice of teaching in his paper, *The role of multi-media in constructing meaningful knowledge*. Ronayne, Shayne, and Nguyen bring readers into their Introductory Psychology classrooms with their article, *Meeting in the middle: Making use of popular culture in the classroom*, wherein they further explore using media as a text in the psychology classroom. Veloria & Pica-Smith demonstrate the qualitative method of research in their empirical article, *At risk means a minority kid: Deconstructing deficit discourses in the study of risk in education and human services*. Robert Faux, in his review of *The Pedagogy of Creativity* by Herbert (2010), shows the reader how to recognize a “powerful account of pedagogy” that incorporates ideas about the unconscious and methods focusing on the teacher-student relationship into the classroom context. Mizock, in her review of *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations* (Eds. Scherff and Spector, 2010), provides a guide to some of the definitions and ideas presented therein. Kallio, with Wells, places *Constructing undergraduate psychology curricula: Promoting authentic learning and assessment in the teaching of psychology* by Mayo (2010) in the context of historical perspectives of psychology theorists, who are known for their emphasis on critical thinking. Original works by Jones and Moscolo further explore and define ideas about critical thinking through their commentaries on the work of previous contributors to *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*.

Critical thinking—for the present authors, and for contributors to Volume II—claims the subjective, implicit, tacit, contextual, ethical, socially conscious, and humanistically relevant aspects of the field of psychology. Where DeCesare (2009) has found specific definitions of critical thinking to be lacking, his *questions*, more than his attempt at a simple, empirically based definition, invite dialogue.

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Hunt (2007) described William James' view of psychology as "natural introspection" or a shift of human consciousness away from mundane, everyday subjective reality and toward objective reality. The movement from subjective to objective reality became the definition of pragmatic American psychology and earned James the title, "Father of American Research Psychology" (Hunt, 2007). Research psychology was born as the objective facts of behavior came to be categorized and analyzed as if by an outside, expert eye (Hunt).

Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2006) in their text *Social cognition: An integrated approach* suggests a challenge to the realist epistemology that is limited to a "knowable domain of facts about human experience" (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue). The realist, determinist, empiricist teacher of psychology collects and disseminates psychological truths in the way that radical educator Freire (2000) thought that teachers "banked" knowledge to hand over directly to students who were "empty vessels" to be filled with expert knowledge.

Psychology for Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2006) becomes critical and discursive when language used to discuss what is going on in the field is social, historical and contextual. For the present authors, this pertains to how the field has impacted or excluded the diverse perspectives of those researched and treated by psychologists, but rarely invited to discuss the implications of psychology. One wonders, how would the *inclusion* of the subjective perspectives of women, Native Americans, Black Americans, immigrants, and "Others" as defined by Foucault (1965) have reshaped the field of psychology as we know it today? The contributors to Volume II of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* were invited to present the perspectives of groups and individuals underrepresented in the dialogue about psychology, although they might be the objects of psychological study.

Knowledge, truth and understanding can involve obvious, tangible and explicit aspects that are open to direct empirical inquiry, but implicit, tacit and contextual aspects of knowledge and truth are important to constantly examine. For Polanyi (1966), tacit knowledge refers to values, passions and feelings of the "knower" of scientific facts. While tacit knowledge is always difficult to specify or codify for Polanyi, it can be specifically examined through constant dialogue and "reasoned analysis" among scientists such that "creative tension" results and new models or theories are created (Smith, 2003). Implicit knowledge has been described as subtle, unconscious aspects of knowledge that are the saving grace of aging adults. With adult development comes the ability to grasp and recall contexts, symbols, main points and discourses surrounding explicit memories better than we can recall the memories themselves (Cavanaugh, Grady & Perlmutter, 1983; Camp, 1998; Johnson, 2003). Yesavage (1983) successfully used implicit memory strategies such as imagery to improve the explicit memories of older versus younger adults. Volume II and future volumes of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* invites examination of these more subtle, tacit, implicit and contextual aspects of knowledge about psychology. DeCesare (2009) alludes to these contextual aspects of the teaching of psychology when he notes that the form of the discussion about the political context of Wells and Harkins' (2009) "diversity courses" critiques political perspectives based on the simple dualism of conservative versus liberal parties. Lakoff (2009) is among the critical thinkers that the present authors believe would provide DeCesare and future contributors to *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* with complex discussions of liberal and conservative perspectives that move beyond the realm of mere

political parties. Authors contributing to Volume II will further examine more general aspects of cultural, historical, and social contexts as these pertain to the knowledge base of psychology.

### **Critical Thinking Methods as Emic, Qualitative, Experiential and Narrative in Approach**

Critical thinking in psychology, by focusing on what is not obvious, and not limited to expert research findings, makes existential space for social perspectives that offer alternatives to empirical models of behavioral study. Critical thinking in psychology examines the *emic*, or subjective perspective in contrast to the *etic*, objective standpoint that assesses the individual from a place that is outside of cultural, historical and personal contexts. A perspective that originates from inside the individual's indigenous reality acknowledges that we as psychologists are naturally *emic* or indigenous to similar human realities as our students, research participants and clients (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimbel, 2002; Shiraev & Levy, 2010).

To the degree that psychologists and teachers in the field engage students, participants and clients in subjective human processes, we can avoid the tragic but comical position that Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2006) described as they opened their text on social cognition. They showed a satirical cartoon by Michael Leunig (1985) entitled *The Understandscope*. It pictured a helpless, sad, yet endearing creature gazing down through a long telescope from a cliff at people in mass turmoil, rioting, looting, and behaving badly. Social psychologists represented by that cartoon character are today in no position to cure social ills or to transform individual behavior because they are too far away from human reality, and they do not allow themselves to be positioned in front of their own telescopes. They assess, describe, and understand at a distance, feeding humanity with the proverbial "long-handled spoon." If we extend the use of the metaphor applied by Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2006) to the teaching of psychology, we can imagine teaching at a safe distance—behind facts, empirical findings, and Power Point presentations—while avoiding the disequilibrium or conflict that DeCesare (2009) warns might frustrate students should we attempt to engage them beyond the distracting technology they might be using to escape uninteresting classes.

Ongoing discourse with psychologists, teachers, and students from all walks of psychological life can make meaning out of conflicts between the modernist and more post-modern teachers and students described by Harkins & Wells (2009). Such discourse might satisfy DeCesare (2009) as he searches for a level of critical thinking in the introductory psychology curriculum of Lewis and Lee (2009) that could lead to broader social action and improvement of specific critical writing skills in students of psychology. DeCesare himself alludes to the transformation of the student of psychology reflected in developmental processes that Basseches and Moscolo (2009) relate to clinical healing, and that Kegan (1994) describes as reflective thought that triggers action by taking us out of a current (modernist, outdated) frame of reference.

DeCesare's critique of Volume I of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* (2009) sparked what contributors to Volume II view as a quest for continued dialogue and discourse with our field on psychology, pedagogy, and the human sciences with experts and laypersons, teachers and students alike. Such dialogue is at the crux of the teaching of psychology. Critical thinking is a dialectical process that occurs at a proverbial "table"

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with colleagues and with humanity. We hope that Volume II and future volumes of *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* will continue the tradition of promoting dialogue among psychology teachers, students and colleagues.

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