

So Exactly What is Critical About Critical Reflection?

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In North America, where I have worked for thirty-five years, one of the joys of professional life is that when you write a book about something you usually get invitations to deliver speeches, run workshops, and generally hold forth in public forums about said topic. Since publishing *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (Brookfield, 1995) I have responded to multiple invitations to explain what critical reflection looks like in a wide variety of settings. It is always creatively interesting to move across institutional boundaries to work with very different groups, all of which profess to be interested in critically reflective practice. What a business executive might label as critically reflective practice (perhaps understanding how key words or images in a marketing campaign are unwittingly turning off a major portion of the intended consumer audience) is complete anathema to a community activist's perception of that process (working to mobilize people shut out from entrenched power structures to organize against, and eventually dismantle, these). Terminology and examples that work with a social movement may well turn off a hospital staff concerned to improve patient care.

Because norms and discourses vary so significantly across organizations and communities, I have been forced to find ways to frame the concept of critical reflection using language and justifications that are highly context-dependent. Since I believe that when you enter a new environment you need to start by connecting to the people who live there in a way that makes sense to them, I find myself constantly tweaking how I introduce the idea of critical reflection. Personally, I would like to start with my own preferred definition of critical reflection as the uncovering of power and hegemony. I regard the critical dimension of reflection to be drawn from critical theory's concern to demonstrate how ideological manipulation forces us to behave in ways that seem to make sense, but that actually keep us powerless. But having this as a starting point is a luxury that rarely presents itself. If I begin a professional development day by telling the audience that I want to lead an effort to uncover institutional hegemony, most people will respond by trying to sneak out and get back to their office to do some 'real' work.

Many of the people I work with outside academe are suspicious of me as an 'ivory tower' academic who lives in a sheltered discursive enclave. To social movements, corporations and the military I suspect I am something of a fragile flower, only functioning when protected by the conservatory of tenure. So one of the things I have had to learn is to introduce the concept of critical reflection using examples and language that are drawn from the context in which I am working. Part of communicating across difference is learning to become subtler when framing your proposals, suggestions and advice so that people hear these in ways that make sense and have influence. And part of that process is appreciating the necessary malleability of language.

Let me give an example. When working with ‘Occupy’ groups in the US, at a critical pedagogy gathering, or with a group of community activists, I can explain what I understand to be critical reflection’s purpose and process by moving straight into the language of classic critical theory. I can talk about the way ideological hegemony is perpetuated, the commodification of contemporary life (particularly education), the spread of disciplinary power and surveillance and how we learn to subvert, push back against, and work to replace unjust structures. But when working with the police or the military using that language would probably be confusing and could well lose me credibility from the outset. I would immediately be dismissed as a rabble rousing troublemaker, probably unpatriotic, and enslaved by leftist ideology. If this is the situation my ability to influence or change anything is fundamentally compromised.

As an adult educator my conviction has always been that you do what you can in whatever situation you find yourself to help people become more critically reflective. So I am willing to work with any group that invites me in. I don’t believe that everyone in a corporation has sold their soul or that everyone in a uniform has no empathy. My parents met while serving in the Royal Navy and my mother subsequently joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and taking food to the Greenham Common peace camp. Part of the creative challenge of any theory to practice work is being forced to justify the value and relevance of your ideas and practices (in this case critical reflection) in unfamiliar environments where maybe only one or two people (the ones who’ve invited you in) think like you. In these situations I work like a stand-up comedian. I have maybe one minute’s goodwill from the audience during which I need to establish that what I’m talking about has meaning.

This opening preamble is all to establish the autobiographical basis to the central theme of this chapter. I want to reframe how practitioners in multiple contexts understand and practice critical reflection in a way that has a truly critical edge. For me that involves centering the process in the intellectual tradition of critical theory. But before we can do that we need to understand that people use the term informed by widely differing ideological framings, and that these framings in turn spring from distinctively different intellectual traditions. In the next few pages I want to present two of the most prominent traditions and explore what critical reflection looks like in each.

The first of these – analytic philosophy – sees reflective practice as a process of thinking better. This tradition holds that the more able you are to recognize logical fallacies, think laterally and detect weak rungs on a ladder of inference, the better placed you are to make good decisions. The second of these – American pragmatism – sees reflection primarily as the analysis of experience. Here a critically reflective practitioner is one who constantly seeks out new information, new understandings of existing practices, and new perspectives, so that she can identify her blind spots. In this tradition the best reflective practitioners are constantly open to revising their assumptions and willing to experiment with different ways of supporting those they work with.

After briefly considering these two dominant conceptualizations I want to take the tradition of critical theory and explore how its’ ideas might best be inserted to change

how the process is understood. This tradition holds that reflection is not, by definition, critical. It is quite possible to practice reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of process and leaving unquestioned the criteria, power dynamics and wider structures that frame a field of practice. Reflection is useful and necessary in the terms it sets itself; that is, to make a set of practices work more smoothly and achieve the consequences intended for them. But this is not *critical* reflection.

Critical reflection calls into question the power relationships that allow, or promote, one set of practices to be defined as technically effective. It assumes that the specifics of particular practices have embedded within them the struggles between unequal interests and groups that exist in the wider world. For reflection to be considered critical it must have as its explicit focus the uncovering, and challenging of power dynamics that frame our decisions and actions. It also attempts to challenge hegemonic assumptions; those assumptions we embrace as being in our best interests when in fact they are working against us. This is what makes critical reflection truly critical.

Critical Reflection as Language Games: the Analytic Philosophy & Logic Tradition

When my children went through the US state school system they were continually assessed according to their exercise of critical thinking. Boiled down to its simplest level they were required to give reasons for any opinions, conclusions or statements they made, whether these were in calculus, social studies or science. Furthermore, these reasons were judged to be more or less valid according to the evidence adduced in support of them. A common classroom activity in social studies was to read a paragraph from a local newspaper and to distinguish between factual statements and statements of opinion. In mathematics, the focus was on learning to demonstrate the reasoning that led to a particular answer, rather than just submitting the correct answer.

In North America the great majority of texts currently published that have the words 'critical' in their title – whether critical thinking or critical reflection - spring from this tradition. They focus on things such as recognizing logical fallacies, distinguishing between bias and fact, opinion and evidence, judgment and valid inference, and becoming skilled at using different forms of reasoning (inductive, deductive, formal, informal, analogical, and so on). The 21 mini guides published by the *Foundation for Critical Thinking* in California illustrate the pre-eminence of this tradition with individual titles on analytic thinking (Elder and Paul, 2010), Socratic questioning (Paul and Elder, 2007), detecting mental trickery (Paul and Elder, 2006a) and the art of asking questions (Elder and Paul, 2006).

Although the analytic philosophy and logic tradition may seem to be primarily technical, concerned with the mechanics of putting arguments together and taking them apart, in practice it is often linked to a moral purpose. For example, one of the Paul and Elder (2006b) 'mini guides' deals with detecting media bias and propaganda. Critically reflective practice that draws on this tradition is potentially as incendiary as the most critical elements of critical theory. George Orwell's essay "The Politics of the English Language" (1946), which is the most anthologized piece of writing in English, makes this

point supremely well.

Orwell argues that propagandists and demagogues understand that language tricks are powerful tools in securing the consent of people to situations that are actually against their best interests. This is what hegemony is – thinking that something is self-evidently true, and acting enthusiastically on that perception as if it were the most obvious, common sense thing in the world, all the while being unaware that your actions benefit those who wish to keep you uninformed. Getting people willingly to agree to, even support, a situation that is hurting them is difficult and cannot be done through force, since outright and overt coercion is easily identified. But control how people think and how they perceive the world – particularly through the use of language and its juxtaposition with images – and you are well on the way to getting people to agree to things that will end up harming them.

Critical Reflection as The Experimental Pursuit of Beautiful Consequences: Pragmatism

American pragmatism emphasizes the importance of continuous experimentation to bring about better (in pragmatist terms, more beautiful) social forms. It argues that in any social project - for example democratizing an organization - we experiment, change, and tinker constantly to make a system work better. Pragmatists hold that the way to become more knowledgeable about how to make something work better is through three strategies: (a) constant experimentation, (b) learning from mistakes, and (c) deliberately seeking out new information and possibilities. Democracy is the political form embraced by pragmatism since it fosters experimentation with diversity.

Unfortunately, colloquial usage has completely altered how most people understand the term pragmatism, to the point where to be ‘pragmatic’ is to be highly opportunistic, ready to pursue one’s selfish ends by any means necessary. This is wholly antithetical to original conceptions of pragmatism from Charles Sanders Pierce, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James and later John Dewey, where pragmatism was always linked to the pursuit of desirable, beautiful consequences. Pragmatism places aesthetic considerations as primary, so the point of experimental action is to increase the amount of beauty in the world. The adult educator Eduard Lindeman, himself heavily influenced by Dewey, regarded a well-lived life as a beautiful and creative construction (Lindeman, 1926/1961).

One of the most well known contemporary exponents of pragmatism is Cornel West (West and Buschendorf, 2014). West admires Dewey’s belief that philosophizing requires the constant critical analysis of assumptions. Thus, a pragmatic orientation “constantly questions the tacit assumptions of earlier interpretations of the past. It scrutinizes the norms these interpretations endorse, the solutions they offer, and the self-images they foster” (West, 1982, p. 20). To pragmatists “norms, premises and procedures ... are never immune to revision” (ibid.). Pragmatism is defined by its “calling into question any form of dogmatism” and its belief in a form of fallibilism in which “every claim is open to revision” (West, 1993, p. 43). It is not to be confused with

an anti-theoretical stance, or with the idea that anything goes depending on the context. Instead, “it subtly incorporates an experimental temper within theory-laden descriptions of problematic situations (for instance, social and cultural crises)” (p. 137).

This emphasis on opening inquiry up to the widest range of voices and perspectives, and the way in which encourages the questioning of taken for granted assumptions, is where pragmatism makes its most distinctive contribution to conceptions of critical reflection. Pragmatism places ordinary, everyday experience as the subject of serious inquiry and the source of serious data. A classically pragmatic approach to solving a problem is to consult all those currently affected by the problem, those who have dealt with the problem in the past, and those with any kind of specialist information, and then to ask them to search their experiences together for useful insights about the causes and resolution of the problem.

The pragmatic approach is probably the least acknowledged tradition in European and Antipodean conceptions of critical reflection. Yet at the European conferences on reflection I attend, I detect its subtle influence everywhere. Hence, critically reflective practice, informed clinical practice or clinical reasoning are all used to describe an essentially pragmatic approach. The exemplary practitioner is held to be one who constantly seeks out new information and is open to taking new perspectives on her practice. She solves problems by comparing experiences with peers, inviting critique of her efforts, and continually checking and revising her assumptions. This is the essence of American pragmatism – the intentional and experimental pursuit of beautiful consequences. Such consequences might be to create a more inclusive workplace, a more equitable and responsive health care system, a more democratic approach to community or organizational decision-making, a more holistic approach to patient care, or helping patients to live more fulfilled lives.

When I work with groups across multiple contexts, the language of American pragmatism is one I typically use when introducing the process of critical reflection. Tell someone that applying a particular approach will improve their decision-making or clinical reasoning, or that it will help uncover blind spots that hamper the realization of their plans, and you usually have their attention. The discourse of ‘diversity’ is extremely popular in the USA right now, so pragmatism’s embrace of the need to hear from as many different voices as possible fits right into many contemporary organizational initiatives. The discourse of ‘effectiveness’, when understood from a pragmatic perspective, can sometimes be uncoupled from an instrumental, neo-Fordist emphasis on improving output and maximizing human capital, and reframed in terms of personal and collective agency, empowerment or self-authorship.

Critical Reflection as Illuminating Power & Hegemony – the Critical Theory Tradition

For me the most provocative intellectual tradition informing critical reflection – the one that makes reflection really ‘critical’ – is the critical theory tradition. Although pragmatism holds that democracy is the political arrangement that best guarantees the

intellectual openness necessary for the advancement of knowledge, critical theory's debt to Marxism, and its connection to democratic socialism, make it a much more politically 'in your face' critical tradition. Here practicing critical reflection is explicitly tied to promoting a particular conception of social justice and to uncovering and redressing power inequities. An example of reflection informed by this tradition is being able to detect and resist ideological manipulation, and to lay bare the abuses of power.

Critical theory is a term associated with thinkers from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), Marcuse (1964) and Habermas (1987). The theory describes the process by which people learn to recognize how unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. These ideologies shape behavior and keep an unequal system intact by making it appear normal. As a body of work critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized; (1) that apparently open, western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism and class discrimination are empirical realities, (2) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology, and (3) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it.

Dominant ideology comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experiences and live their lives. When it works effectively it ensures that an economically unequal, racist, homophobic and sexist society is able to reproduce itself with minimal opposition. Its chief function is to convince people that the world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous. From the perspective of critical theory, a critical person is one who can identify this manipulation and discern how the ethic of capitalism, and the logic of bureaucratic rationality, push people into ways of living that perpetuate economic, racial and gender oppression. Becoming critically reflective, therefore, involves helping people to see that behind the apparently normal façade of daily life ideological manipulation works to keep people quiet and in line.

An important element in this tradition is the thought of Antonio Gramsci (1971) whose concept of hegemony explains the way in which people are convinced to embrace ways of thinking and acting that they believe are in their own best interests, when they are, in fact, harmful to them. When hegemony is working properly we believe our situation is clearly desirable and represents a common sense way of understanding the world. For example, the idea of fulfilling a vocation, of being in service to one's students, patients, colleagues, or clients is, in my experience, almost universal across the human services professions in the US and Europe. This seems self-evident, morally desirable as a wholly admirable way of being a truly compassionate and effective professional.

Viewed from a critical theory lens, however, this idea is not the unmitigated, self-evidently good thing it appears to be. It has a dark side, notwithstanding its morally admirable aspects. Quite simply, this sense of vocation, of fulfilling a calling to the

selfless service of others, opens practitioners to the possibility of exploitation and manipulation. Vocation becomes hegemonic when it is used to justify workers taking on responsibilities and duties that far exceed their energy or capacities, and that destroy their health and personal relationships. In effect their self-destruction serves to keep a system going that is being increasingly starved of resources. If workers will kill themselves taking on more and more work in response to budgets being cut, and if they learn to take pride in this apparently selfless devotion to students, clients or patients, then the system is strengthened. Money can be channeled into corporate tax breaks and military expenditure as people in the human services gladly give more and more for less and less.

Vocation becomes especially hegemonic when filtered through patriarchy, as is evident in predominantly female professions such as teaching, social work and nursing. Again and again in my time as a university teacher I have seen female faculty internalizing the ethic of vocation, and being held to a higher standard regarding its realization, than is the case with their male counterparts. Women lecturers in departments often become cast as the nurturers, known by students for their excellent teaching and advisement. Translated into academic reality this means that female practitioners are willing to spend time working with students rather than locking themselves away in their offices writing articles and books in an effort to gain tenure. Since dominant ideology presumes men to be less relational, less prone to an ethic of care and compassion (in short, less moved by a sense of vocational calling) they receive less opprobrium for being unavailable to students.

When the notion of vocational calling is embedded in institutional culture it means that good or effective professionals should be willing to sacrifice their mental and physical well being to the cause of student learning (which translates into meaning for the overall institutional good). Conceived this way vocation ensures that you start to think of any day on which you don't come home exhausted as a day when you have not been "all that you can be". If you have any energy left for your family, friends, or recreational pursuits, then you have failed to give your all to your students. If, however, all you can manage at the end of the day is to microwave a lasagne and watch a DVR of last week's *Strictly Come Dancing*, then you know you've done a good day's work. A state of burn out becomes a sign of your commitment to your vocation. Anything less than total exhaustion indicates a falling short of the mark of complete professionalism.

So what seems on the surface to be a politically neutral idea on which all reasonable persons could agree – that exemplary professionalism is a vocation of service to clients and learners calling for dedication and hard work – becomes manipulated to mean we should squeeze the work of two or three jobs into the space where one can fit comfortably. Lived out this way, professionalism as vocation becomes a hegemonic concept; an idea that seems a morally desirable example of commonsense wisdom, but that ends up working against practitioners' own best interests. The interests it serves are those of people who wish to run departments and divisions efficiently and profitably while spending the least amount of money, and employing the smallest amount of staff, they can get away with. On a broader scale, education as vocation becomes a metaphor that supports the commodification of learning, the turning of schools and colleges into centers of production concerned to minimize expenditure and maximize output. What is

felt as a private moral commitment is actually a mechanism of control and a prop to the maintenance of the exchange economy. As long as practitioners view taking on heavier and heavier workloads as examples of their vocational diligence, and as long as they take pride in the level of commitment this shows, then smaller and smaller resources can be devoted to the provision of services.

Understood through the lens of critical theory, critical reflection involves the experience of questioning, and then replacing or reframing, a hegemonic assumption that is unquestioningly accepted as representing dominant commonsense by a majority – such as the assumption that the best, most effective professionals work themselves into the ground and are accessible 24/7. Since critical theory regards the mainstream majority as being ideologically manipulated to conform, critical reflection also entails exploring perspectives on social and political structures, or on personal and collective actions, that are strongly alternative to those held by a majority. Its focus is always on analyzing commonly held ideas and practices for the extent to which they perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence and prevent people from realizing a sense of common connectedness. Understood in this way critical reflection is a reflexive habit, a stance towards the world in which the deconstruction of ideas and professional practices for the interests they serve becomes second nature.

Creating an Entry Point into Critical Reflection: Beginning With Narrative

How might those of us committed critical reflection (especially that informed by critical theory) create a point of access into the idea for colleagues, clients, and students? For me the way to untangle complex ideas begins, whenever possible, with the use of personal narrative. There is no more powerful way to create an entry point into understanding theoretical work than through an autobiographical illustration of seemingly impenetrable material. For example, to illustrate the way that dominant ideology is learned and internalized, and how it inserts itself into even the most private areas of our lives, I like to use my response to my own clinical depression as an explanatory tool.

In my 50's and 60's depression entered my life. I don't mean depression as feeling blue or sad about the state of the world or personal misfortune. I mean depression as an overwhelming sensation that life is pointless and you are of no use to anyone, or that you will die any minute. The black dog of depression settles on you with no rhyme or reason and is unconnected to external circumstance. When it started to bark at me my response was to respond with a masculine uber-rationality. Because my life was going well I said to myself, I should just "snap out of it" by using reasoning and acknowledging the privilege of my external circumstances. I had a loving family, work I loved, and played in a band. Being depressed was clearly stupid so if I told myself that forcefully enough, then everything would be fine.

Of course it wasn't. As I said to myself for the hundredth time that day to 'snap out of it' – and was unable to do so – I was enveloped in self-disgust and shame at my weakness and helplessness. After all, if there was no objective reason to be depressed, then my inability to escape this state meant I had no will power, no determination, no initiative.

I could not shake my feeling of shame because of my uncritical acceptance of the ideology of patriarchy. “I’m a man, I’m supposed to be ruled by reason, I should be able to keep my feelings under control” was the inner voice that rumbled beneath my more conscious conversations. To take drugs to deal with a problem was something that would be OK if I was a woman, but was surely a sign of weakness for a man.

The ideology of patriarchy holds men to be superior reasoning beings, ruled by logic in decision-making in contrast to women, who are held to be victims of irrationality, ruled only by emotion and therefore too easily swayed by feelings to be trusted with major decisions. Now if you had asked me what I thought of patriarchy, I would have told you it was a destructive ideology, one I rejected unequivocally. But I have learned that what I think are my obvious, conscious, commitments often mask much a deeper and more enduring acceptance of dominant ideology.

So one thing I realized about overcoming the self-loathing and shame of depression was that for me, a man, it required a process of ideological detoxification. I had to understand just how deeply and powerfully the ideology of patriarchy had been implanted in me over my five decades on the planet. And I had to understand too that stopping it from determining how I thought about, and responded to, my own depression, would be a long haul. For example, month after month, year after year, I refused to consider any suggestion of medication. This refusal was underscored by the fact that the only people I knew who were taking medication for mental problems were all women. There was no male I was aware of who was under meds for depression. Even today, despite having written books on critical theory (Brookfield, 2004) and radicalizing learning (Brookfield and Holst, 2010) – both of which explore how to resist ideological manipulation - I still can’t shake the feeling that there’s an unseemly lack of manliness, or grit, in my suffering from and disclosing, my depression.

Critical Reflection in Practice – Uncovering Power

In a critically reflective environment there would also be a constant, intentional effort to uncover the power dynamics present in any group trying to work reflectively. Assessing and discussing the way that the person or team in positional authority exercised their power would certainly be part of this process. There would need to be a willingness to institute some form of continuous formative evaluation of when that power was used responsively and ethically and when it was used abusively. And the findings of this evaluation would have to be discussed publicly.

One specific way I have tried to accomplish this when in a position of authority myself is through the use of a *Critical Incident Questionnaire* (CIQ). This is a five-question instrument I distribute after every meeting I chair, every class I teach and every workshop or training I conduct and then commit to sharing the responses with the group the next time we meet. The questions ask participants when they were most engaged and most distant, which actions that anyone took were most helpful or puzzling, and what surprised them most during the event. The responses are collected, summarized, and then reported back to the whole group the next time it meets. Sometimes I take responsibility for

analyzing and sharing the responses. At other times (particularly when the group mistrusts me) I never see any of the completed forms and different members of the group take turns in collecting and reporting out people's responses.

Using this anonymous form creates a public forum in which your own leadership can be critiqued. It shows you are open to hearing from multiple perspectives and that you take colleagues, students or staff seriously enough to respond publicly to their criticisms in a respectful and non-defensive way. It also allows you to clarify with a group when your assumptions have been confirmed and strengthened by participants' responses, and when these have been challenged. If you have to stand your ground and are unable to budge from a point of principle or an agenda, then you clarify why that's the case. For example, I won't budge on insisting that students think critically or that staff address racial micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010). But I will engage people in negotiating the possibly different ways we can pursue these projects. And I will do my best to explain why I stand my ground in the place I do.

CIQ responses also bring forth the problems, concerns and criticisms that individuals are often reluctant to voice in public for fear of being seen as deviant, not pulling their weight or not being a team-player. The organizational unmentionables identified by Argyris (2010) have a much greater chance of being spoken about if members truly believe the instrument to be anonymous. Perceptions of my leadership as arrogant or arbitrary, or concerns about the way power is disproportionately exercised by a minority of group members, will be expressed on these one page forms. Hearing about others' experiences of being caught in a systemic contradiction (such as being expected to do much more work with far less resources) helps foster a collective realization that so-called individual problems actually need to be understood structurally and addressed collectively.

Critical reflection is ultimately a collaborative process. We need colleagues, clients, peers and experts to pose questions to us, introduce new ways of looking at practice, and support us through the periods of struggle when challenging dominant assumptions threatens our sense of identity and raises the risk of our being marginalized. This is very much in line with critical theory's emphasis on political organizing as the beginning to structural change. Reflection done in a critical key requires practitioners collectively to confront power dynamics that have become habitual and to uncover assumptions and practices that have become hegemonic. This is what makes reflective practice truly critical.

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