

Pedagogy out of order: Relinking critical teaching with the dialogical aspect of transformative learning

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Abstract

This commentary is a criticism of the dominating technical approach to critical teaching, which the author views as inherently linked with promoting what Jack Mezirow called transformative learning. The author suggests that both cognitive and dialogical orientations are necessary to promote authentic transformation through critical teaching. The author discusses the problems involved in over-focus on the technical cognitive aspect in critical teaching, and welcomes a dialogical focus in critical teaching as a way to promote students' authentic transformative learning.

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The interest in critical teaching among the teaching community has grown in recent years. This trend is due partly to the fact that critical teaching has become a pedagogy peddled to teachers in a manner similar to traveling roads shows. "Sellers" promise teachers that critical teaching is a miraculous and simple pedagogy that can shake up and stir students in a meaningful way that has a lasting effect. But as in the case of the old snake oil sellers, here too the promises are too good to be true. The problem is that the marketing of critical teaching as off-the-shelf pedagogy leads to a misuse of critical teaching and to an increase in abuses performed in the name of critical teaching. In a nutshell, the emphasis on the technical aspect of critical teaching provides a narrow perspective on the learning process because the interpersonal and contextual complexities in which critical inquiry takes place are neglected.

Critical teaching is defined as "Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions" in order to "to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse" (Shor, 1992, p. 129).

Mainstream scholarly and practice-based discourse addresses critical teaching from a narrow instrumental perspective that focuses attention on related teaching materials and practices, possible topics, and students' relevant cognitive skills. Teachers' use of critical questioning is a fundamental component, if not the cornerstone, of the process (Morrell, 2008). Asking students to answer critical questions allegedly enhances their learning and develops their higher-order thinking (Paul et al., 1995). Some argue that the hallmark of critical teaching occurs when students' thinking becomes primed with critical consciousness, as they internalize the external verbal deliberation into their inner thinking processes (Allen & Alexander, 2014). However, I suggest that the ultimate goal of critical teaching is more than developing applied deliberative and cognitive skills, and it involves promoting students' transformative learning.

Transformative learning is a reflective process that involves deep change in meaning schemes that shape one's beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions (Mezirow, 2009). This fundamental change in worldview is related to one's formation of new conceptual frames and affective experiences of the world (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). By definition, transformative learning is about promoting a dramatic and

lasting shift in the manner in which individuals perceive themselves and the world around them (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012). Such a deep change in meaning schemes (i.e., rooted beliefs and attitudes) is linked to the learners' critical reflection on their knowledge and experiences.

Furthermore, although critical inquiry is touted as an individual learning process, it is important to understand that interpersonal aspects are embedded in its operation and therefore relational elements cannot be ignored. Critical inquiry occurs in what Lev Vygotsky (1978) called the "zone of proximal development," because individual's learning of critical skills takes place in the presence of another individual, often the teacher and at times a peer, who has experience with this method. But the dialogical aspects involved in critical teaching are often neglected when critical inquiry is perceived as a mostly cognitive exercise. Use of critical teaching as a technical strategy reshapes learning as a much narrower transformative process than the identity-related process described above. The greater problem, however, is that this misuse greatly increases the abuses made in the name of critical teaching. I detect three abuses that commonly occur in the learning process because of the technical focus in critical teaching: (a) indoctrination (the "nothing but the truth" abuse), (b) moral relativism (the "it's all relative" abuse), and (c) illusion of change (the "power of words" abuse).

First, the narrow technical emphasis in critical teaching can lead to indoctrination (McCowan, 2011). As technique becomes the focal point of the learning process, the misconception spreads among teachers that mastering the technique necessarily leads the students to a set of answers, similar to those the teachers themselves have reached (Burbules & Burk, 1999). Thus, verbally urging students to think freely for themselves is a false pretense, and at times the teachers are unaware of their own pretense. The subtext in many learning environments is that critical teaching must lead to particular conclusions, so that in practice students are primed to think the same way as the teacher does.

Second, the mechanical emphasis in critical teaching can also lead to moral relativism (McCowan, 2011). The critical focus on revealing assumptions and power relations rapidly boils down to finding errors and faults in arguments. Thus, questioning accepted reality and knowledge leads to intellectual chaos and political subjectivism (Cunliffe, 2009). This extreme paradox can be found in the thought

hovering over students' minds in classrooms: "If my own claims can be criticized, why should I bother to formulate them in the first place or commit to them?"

Third, the technical emphasis in critical teaching can lead teachers to the illusion that they are involved in a process of meaningful change (McCowan, 2011). This focus causes teachers to embrace the belief that articulating the "right" statements and conveying the "right" arguments in the classroom can have a deep and lasting transformational effect on students. As a result, teachers may unknowingly renounce their professional commitment to help students experience meaningful learning. Furthermore, this belief in technique can motivate teachers to attend strictly to the students' cognitive mindset (Cook-Sather, 2002), and not acknowledge the tacit contextual elements that frame the learning process.

To counter-balance these abuses, I suggest embracing a dialogical perspective on critical teaching. I believe that a dialogical focus can rein in the three abuses discussed above. A dialogical emphasis in critical teaching realigns teachers' support of the students' meaning making in interpersonal and contextual frames, charging critical instrumental technique with (a) dialogical moralism, (b) dialogical tentativism, and (c) dialogical groundedness.

First, the dialogical approach suggests that morality and ethics are relational at their core, shifting the center of gravity in the debate about morality from abstract moral principles and political norms to social obligations toward other individuals (Levinas, 1981). In such a process, the purpose of critical inquiry changes from assessing claims to examining one's judgment and how it affects others. Thus, metaphorically speaking, a dialogical approach is a kite's anchor for critical teaching, focusing the transformative learning process taking place in the classroom on empathy and humanism (Author, year).

Second, in contrast to the instrumental approach to education, which increases the chances of indoctrination by educators, the dialogical approach suggests a more co-developmental process (Buber, 1961). This is possible because the dialogical approach views individuals as being in a constant process of becoming. Instead of viewing one's self as definitive, dialogical philosophy embraces a perception of a dynamic self, engaged in a lifelong journey of exploration (Author, year). Furthermore, the dialogical approach perceives individuals as non-coherent and at times having contradicting aspects. This view helps develop an open discourse between teacher and students.

Third, the dialogical approach to critical teaching suggests that change is meaningful and sustainable when it occurs in a true mutual relational setting and in an organizational culture that supports dialogical interactions. Thus, deep transformation is linked to more than words, as it involves changes in the authority shaping teacher-student relations (Cook-Sather, 2002), opening up the curriculum (Lefstein, 2010), and other contextual adaptations in the classroom and in the institutional environment. Acknowledging that such changes in power structures and practices are necessary, and acting to promote them increases the possibility that learning will result in meaningful transformation.

To sum, educators' fascination with critical pedagogy is understandable, but because it has been marketed as an off-the-shelf magical solution critical teaching has been used in classrooms in a narrow instrumental way. This technical misuse fosters abuses committed in the name of critical teaching. To promote meaningful identity-related aspects associated with transformative learning, teachers must pay attention to the dialogical aspects involved in the critical inquiry process. I hope that readers will regard this text as an invitation to teachers to reinvent critical teaching as a moral, humanistic, and meaningful transformative process.

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