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CRITICAL THINKING: BEYOND A “PASSIVE LANDSCAPE”

Amanda Kennedy, Bryn Mawr College, 2013

Before my experience as a student consultant with the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) began in September 2012, I had thought of critical thinking as a malleable lens but a static process: while the number of ways a learner could interact with knowledge is myriad, the steps a learner should go through in order to think critically about a topic or text must be somewhat finite, I had thought. But during my year-long faculty partnership with Peter Magee, Associate Professor of Archaeology at Bryn Mawr College, and my conversations with TLI Coordinator Alison Cook-Sather and the rest of the student consultant cohort, I realized that my personal interpretation of critical thinking has been constantly redefined and has proven, in a way, a threshold concept for me as well as for the students in the courses that provided the context of my work with Professor Magee.

The theme of critical thinking has been evident in my partnership with Professor Magee since our first semester together. It emerged organically during conversation, as Professor Magee expressed interest in my investigating how palpable students’ critical processes are, and how these processes emerge in the classroom. During the Fall 2012 semester, I observed Professor Magee’s two complimentary half-semester classes, “Focus: Archaeology Fieldwork and Methods,” a 100-level class exploring the fundamentals of the practice of archaeology, and “Focus: Archaeological Science,” a 100-level class that introduces students to the role of science in archaeology in the contemporary practice of archaeology.

Initially, it was challenging to assess whether students were thinking critically because both classes were lecture style, an environment rife with student questions and responses to Professor Magee’s questions, but there was less frequent class discussions, in which I thought I might have been more easily able to identify critical thinking. However, within these responsive exchanges between Professor Magee and the students, I witnessed students attempting to wrap their brains around archaeological topics and do their own thinking about those. Looking for way that they were thinking critically made me reflect on the nature of critical thinking.

For instance, after an in-class film clip the students watched, Professor Magee asked students to consider the people in the film, who were silently making pots. “They are a part of a passive landscape,” he said. Magee was asking students to think in a particular way about the relationship between people and their environment, and his words catalyzed my own thoughts around critical thinking. I wrote in my notebook, “Makes me think about the role of students within a (any) classroom and how they should not become a part of the landscape but instead question, push against, and understand it through interactions with it and the teacher.” Students should not be a part of a passive classroom landscape but instead activate their own perceptions of knowledge.

During the spring 2013 semester, TLI student consultants explored threshold concepts, defined as “conceptual gateways” or “‘portals’ that lead to a transformed view of something” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 19). In my work with Professor Magee I found a connection between threshold concepts and the process of critical thinking. Professor Magee further enlightened this

connection by giving me his own interpretation of a threshold concept, which impacts and changes a field, rather than reinforces it. Professor Magee considers a threshold concept to be focused on the discipline. My fellow student consultants and I grappled with the strictness of the definition during many a TLI meeting, suggesting instead that crossing a threshold can have a more expansive interpretation. We asked, “Is a rite of passage a threshold?” “What about the realization of the existence of white privilege?” Pushing against threshold concepts suggests our ability to think critically about issues of pedagogy. Critical thinking requires routing and re-routing our learning.

Even though the process of critical thinking varies. Professor Cook-Sather has a different lens than Professor Magee regarding the stimulation of critical thinking in the classroom. During a TLI student cohort meeting, she challenged traditional notions of starting by building a foundation of the basics and asked, Why don’t we start with the bigger ideas and invite students to build their understanding through working with those?

Perhaps a learner’s ability to think critically depends on the learning environment itself. A learner can shape his or her critical thinking process based on a professor’s teaching style, class discussions, lectures, the amount of speaking he or she does during a class period. The critical thinking process becomes a threshold in itself, based on the discipline, the environment, even interest in the subject matter. But no matter the environment, critical thinking is a critical tool for maximizing learning.