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Grounded Practice: Exploring Criticalities in a Job Re-Education Setting

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Abstract: The author uses an interpretive ethnographic method to study criticality as a classroom phenomenon within a job-reeducation program. Two central ideas used include criticality as multiple, intertwined criticalities and the notion of working in spaces. Focusing on critical reflection and ideology critique, the author examines spaces in which criticality can be fostered, forms it might take, and pedagogies that reflected classroom practices. Finally, she discusses the challenges involved with working in an institution, ethics, and the strategic nature of teaching for criticality.

Introduction

Numerous prominent adult education scholars have urged the field to engage in the practice of “critical” adult education. Scholars of a critical bent believe that adult education is a significant force in shaping the social, economic, political, and cultural lives of human beings; it is therefore our responsibility as adult educators to be not only effective teachers, but to teach in a way that promotes justice and democracy (Cunningham, 1996; Welton, 1995). Critical adult educators approach teaching from different standpoints and have different visions on what constitutes justice and democracy (Brookfield, 1995; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Foley, 1999; Freire, 1993; Hart, 1992; Hill, 1995; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Newman, 1994). However, all agree that critical teaching involves a serious examination of social processes and assumptions in an effort to become critically conscious and enable us to act in ways that are socially responsible.

This paper addresses the problem of teaching for criticality in day-to-day classroom situations. It seems entirely possible to forget why either one is important when the details of teaching demand attention or the course seems to have little to do with larger social values. In this sense, critical often becomes a de facto subject area and is ignored as a perspective or practice. Critical teaching is important in even the most unlikely subject areas, however, if one agrees with critical adult educators that we need to be aware of self and society such that we remember and consistently address our responsibilities to each.

Method

Interpretive ethnography is a form of research that interrogates moments or periods of interaction and attempts to understand self and other as mutually constructed. It views culture as a creative, complex, emergent process, and works to understand how people construct and live meaning in daily life. Interpretive ethnography is autoethnographic in that it begins with the researcher, going beyond acknowledgment to inclusion. An author functions as both academic

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and personal self in telling and attempting to understand experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographic narratives center on meaning and the exploration of moral and ethical questions. They are intended to offer lessons, encourage compassion, promote dialogue, and advance understanding rather than arrive at particular inevitable or non-debatable conclusions. Ellis & Bochner note: “The crucial issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put” (p. 748). They are critical, but operate within a politics of hope.

Using this method, the paper moves away from didactic discussions of critical thinking, critical reflection, and logic. Rather, it explores manifestations of criticality as they developed in job-related skills classes. The paper is grounded in an examination of my teaching experience and attempts to interrelate experience and the literature I used to understand different criticalities in their various manifestations and complexity.

Criticalities and the Classroom

Context

The job-reeducation program was located within a small college in Pennsylvania. Industrial layoffs were rampant in the city and surrounding area as businesses closed factories, so the program provided the college with a significant and consistent source of revenue. However, it was marginalized in terms of resources, political influence, and legitimacy. Issues arose surrounding lab access, instructor wages and benefits, and student resources within the college. The program lasted from three to six months and included in-depth word processing, spreadsheets, basic accounting, business writing and math, and other subjects targeted toward entry-level office positions. My computer lab was on the third floor of an older classroom building that, due to maintenance issues, provided neither a safe nor a comfortable learning environment. It was an uncomfortable situation at best.

For this study, I focused on eight female students, seven white and one African-American. Most students had worked from 10 to 40 years in factories. Their attendance, punctuality and effort were never in question. Our classroom schedule reflected the factory workday - breaks were to be strictly observed and class ended promptly at noon. Most took direction willingly and were anxious to “get it right,” but displayed little initiative and frequently had difficulty getting beyond assignment details to concepts. Confidence levels varied greatly. In terms of working on computers or finding a job, the women had little if any confidence. Regarding their families and abilities to handle heavy workloads, the women had an amazing, humble self-assurance. Most students were cheerful, had a high-school education and a working class background. A few specific details about each student follow.

Nina, Kelly, and sisters Debbie and Sue were sewing factory workers ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. Nina had an aptitude for the material under study, though her dream was to open a child care center in her home. Kelly outstripped the rest of the students in terms of assignments completed and demonstrated understanding of the material. Debbie and Sue were sisters; their tenure in the factory was close to fifty years.

Lois was a divorced woman in her late fifties who had approximately a third-grade reading level. Laid off from a tannery where she worked since her teens, Lois struggled in class but was exceptionally dedicated. Nikeisha, in her early twenties, was a black, separated parent of two school-age children. Nikeisha worked nights in a food-preparation factory. During the day she cared for her children and attended class. She did well; given enough sleep, she would have excelled. Ruth was a self-funded student in her seventies. She had a confident demeanor, could

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type, wrote well and frequently disagreed with me on points of grammar. Carla was quite young, about 19 years of age. She was unmarried, had a small child, and lived on public assistance. Carla was in the program as part of a Welfare-to-Work initiative. She was adept on the computer and could write reasonably well, but missed class regularly and seldom applied herself.

The final key player in this class was the instructor. I was in my early twenties and this was my first job after earning a bachelor's degree, though I had about two years' experience teaching in the program. I, too, was white and had a working class background. I cared for my students and worked diligently to encourage, assist, teach well, and develop my students' confidence in their ability to use computers and find a position. I was also woefully ignorant in many ways.

Criticality in Practice

Criticality is not singular, but rather multiple, intertwined criticalities (Boxler, 2001). This article focuses on two, with brief mention of a third. At one level, there is Western rational problem solving and basic critical thinking, in which one works with assumptions and following a line of reasoning (Paul, 1993). This criticality was central to my practice in several ways, but for the purposes of this article it is subsumed in both critical reflection and ideology critique.

Critical reflection, according to Brookfield, is the identification and questioning of assumptions and practices in light of some understanding of power and interest (Brookfield, 1995). For me, this essentially means seeing the social in oneself—understanding that one is a product of social conditioning, that one exists in relationship with society, and understanding that one contributes by her life and actions to the construction of society. It is the attempt to identify and understand those relationships not only in terms of power and interest, though they are crucial, but also in terms of personal values, meanings and emotional impacts. Ideology critique builds on this by incorporating elements of social analysis and criticism in order to consciously contribute to social change (Foley, 1999; Welton, 1995). It is the flip side of the critically reflective coin in that it involves seeing oneself in the social, and thus able to effect some miniscule impact by our examined and subsequently altered actions.

It was necessary to engage in critical reflection and ideology critique because my students and I needed to work through ideologies surrounding women and laborers in order to see ourselves in different ways (Blundell, 1995). Getting past deeply entrenched negative, defeatist images of “self as stupid, ignorant and unskilled” was essential to generate the confidence needed to rise to situational challenges. I tried industriously to encourage students, validating their knowledge and skills, but discovered that until the students validated their knowledge and skills there was little I could do.

These two criticalities needed to be encouraged at individual and class levels; critical reflection and ideology critique were necessary for students to see themselves as products of and in active relationship with social constructs and society. In class, two themes emerged that the women were willing to address and could help them to achieve their goal of obtaining new work. One was work and the other was feminine roles.

Working in Spaces

Many students were bitter about working in the factory, while others were angry, sad, or cynical. Few were happy. I heard many stories about browbeating, intimidation, terrible working conditions, and workers setting upon one another in fierce and dirty competition. It was not difficult, in this environment where students shared a relatively common history and outlook, to

encourage listening and dialogue. In so doing, we were using “space.” It was not allocated time or part of the curriculum and in fact was a bit illicit, but nonetheless represented time when we could talk about things that really mattered (Cherland, 1994).

One space opened up because many women were vocal about gender issues and relationships. Stories came up regarding male supervisors and intimidation, “big” bosses, lack of respect for workers’ experience and knowledge of their machines and jobs and, even more frequently, the daily family-related workload. Stories like this were addressable at the classroom level. Nearly all students could and did contribute. The tone was sometimes one of complaint, but the activity included a productive trading of ideas for changing the situation. If, however, I spoke to any women about her case on an individual basis, I would typically receive a shrug and a comment along the lines of “That’s the way it is.” The group, therefore, made this particular dialogical space possible.

There were other areas where this collective space created “groupthink.” Groupthink occurred in the case of Carla, known unflatteringly (but quietly) by fellow students as “The Welfare Queen.” Carla was unabashed about using the welfare system, and pleased to describe her manipulation of it. She was judged, criticized, and ostracized by other students. I was not able to address the criticisms of Carla in a group, as the talk was an undercurrent; nor was I well prepared to address it on an individual basis.

On an individual level I also worked to create and see spaces in which to foster criticalities. Each woman had a different capacity for depth, topic and type of criticality. Ruth, for one, did not accept stereotypical ideas about age, or about the difficulties of finding a good job in her mid-seventies. Nikeisha never “joined” the group, always remaining aloof. However, during private conversation it became clear that she had done a sophisticated critical analysis of her own context within local culture, where stereotypes about race and single parenthood were central issues. I learned a great deal from her, but she never came to voice in class. Nikeisha believed (correctly, in my opinion) that she was not well positioned relative to the classroom white-normative culture (Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Tisdell, 2001).

The fostering of criticalities in any given context is not a function of the class alone. It is also a function of the organizational environment. Because our program mattered so little in the larger organizational scheme, what we did was largely unmonitored. This created space, as many decisions concerning exercises, books, scheduling, and other details fell to me. I used to feel guilty about using the spaces described above. We were, after all, “wasting time,” not doing “real” work. I felt underhanded in selecting potentially provocative material for exercises. It was an early and intuitive manifestation of critical, feminist tendencies. I simply felt compelled to engage certain issues, specifically those that I thought impeded my students’ development and could be impacted. Those transgressions, as hooks calls them (hooks, 1995), were beginnings of the use of spaces, seizing moments in the everyday to enable us to think about our selves and our places in society. I did not challenge many of the ideas or positions that came up in class as strongly as I might now—I was and am sure that I would have been discounted with some justification as a young idealist—yet hooks (1995) articulates well the principle I was developing during this time

that the work of any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students was necessarily and fundamentally radical, that ideas were not neutral, that to teach in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens, is to challenge domination at its very core. (p. 199)

Pedagogies

hooks (1994) describes an engaged pedagogy that removes people's emotions from isolation and at the same time encourages critical thought in learning and working for social improvement. These women were never before in a class where their experiences, angers, frustrations and friendships were heard and validated. Our class was about job skills, but the emotional component was central to cohesion of the group and success of some critical learning. In an engaged pedagogy, it is necessary to have an idea of the web of relationships (Tisdell, 2001), because those relationships help determine what types of criticalities I could foster, to what extent, how, and with whom.

One significant element in the aforementioned web is instructor positionality, best examined using "the connections between one's individual (constantly shifting) identity and social structures" (Tisdell, 1998, p. 146). My identity as instructor in this class was young (early twenties), female, single, white, college graduate, computer nerd, and teacher. Our relationships—between individual students and myself as well as between the class and me—were complex and in constant flux. I was younger than all but one of the students in years and experience. As such, I would ordinarily have had a subordinate role to all the women except Carla and possibly Nikeisha. Singleness strengthened that tendency. I did not have babies or a husband to manage, and therefore lacked any "real" experience, from the students' point of view, to have taught me much by way of wisdom. While their experiences were not validated by the world of work, many of mine were not validated in the world of these women. Whiteness was normative and never mentioned in the larger group. Female was also normative, except that female was usually seen as "co-worker" or "friend" and not "authority figure" such as supervisor or husband. As a college educated teacher and computer "expert" I had status and authority. Furthermore, the class as a whole had a distinct identity with which I also had a relationship. The class treated our situation much as if we were in the factory, where they were workers and I was a supervisor instructing them on a new machine. Theirs was to obey and to work diligently, and they did. In that sense the class had a solidarity, an identity, created in direct contrast to my identity as authority figure.

Storytelling is a major tool for use in fostering criticalities. Spontaneous telling of stories in class was commonplace. Because most students came from similar backgrounds, stories were individual and collective. In one class, each woman from the sewing factory told which parts of garments they sewed, and how. The sisters Debbie and Sue started by critiquing the construction of a blazer I wore that day (much to my chagrin), noting that the plaids were not matched at shoulder seams. Other women added their observations on the garment, including commentary on evenness of stitching and placement of the lining (I never wore it again and now select blazers more carefully). The stories moved into a description of factory work, the lines (areas of production), the problems, and what the women did to "make things work." Much more importantly and to my great delight, the students evinced pride and confidence while doing so; they were clear, articulate, strong in a way I never saw before or after.

Connection was a theme in the class, observably harmful and helpful. Flannery distinguishes "between two aspects of connection: connection with/in the self, and connection with others" (Flannery, 2000, p. 115). Several women in this class connected strongly, but equally significant were the connections that were not made. Co-workers from the sewing factory—Nina, Kelly, Debbie, and Sue—formed the core of the class, having established relationships and gone through the layoff process together. Lois' experiences and age were close enough that she connected easily with the core group. In a time of uncertainty and self-doubt,

those relationships provided extensive support. Simultaneously, the connections provided a means of isolating other members of the class, specifically Nikeisha (whose blackness and single parenthood rendered her vulnerable to stereotypes) and Carla (The Welfare Queen). Understanding was partial, as were connection with others and knowledge. Had we been able to explore connections and non-connections, some truly critical learning might have taken place. Because each woman was in a different place—open to some things but closed to other ideas, ways of thinking and operating—we were not well prepared to undertake such a daunting task.

Implications: Critical Reflections

Instrumental reason was expected as a critical development and would not cause any major ripples within the program's parent institution. Critical reflection was implied (for example, rethinking one's place in the world of work) though not explicit or directed. Much activity along the lines of ideology critique would be frowned upon and definitely did not fit in well with the institutional mindset. Therefore, any efforts in the latter direction would necessarily need to be covert, appearing "spontaneously" during the natural rhythms of class. Ethical issues surrounded my efforts for critical teaching and development. Was it appropriate to operate covertly? Should I have declared myself openly? Was it appropriate to attempt changes that I was sure would be frowned upon by the institution for which I worked? Was it responsible to encourage students to be critical, as in Nikeisha's case, when I had no way of understanding or predicting where it would go? The questions highlight the importance of working out explicitly one's loyalties and imperatives as person and teacher (Newman, 1994).

It is important to recognize the limits of what one can and should do. It is equally important to recognize that strategy is of the essence when attempting to teach for criticality. Were I to do it again, my efforts would be more systematic, grounded consciously in analysis of the organization, the program, my self and the students. I would very carefully consider material for exercises that would speak to the students of their lives, and continue to make space for dialogue despite infringement on designated class time. Finally, all would need to be done while recognizing the circumscribed, partial nature of possibilities in the context.

I did not make the most effective use of spaces, nor was I able to articulate much of that which I examine now. My teaching for criticality was halting, tentative, and intuitive. It is significant that I imagined myself as largely teaching for my students' sakes - *they* needed to examine their oppression, *they* needed confidence, *they* did not value their knowledge enough. Upon reflection, it seems clear that I was seeking in those same areas throughout the class.

Conclusion

This article has several implications for those who wish to teach critically—that is, for those who believe that we need to be aware of self and society, and that it is important to remember and address consistently our responsibilities to each. A first point is that criticality is really multiple criticalities: it takes different forms and has different purposes depending upon context. If one wishes to develop critical thinkers in a class, it is necessary to question what sort of critical thinkers one is looking for - practical problem solvers? Logicians? Reflective practitioners? Social critics? A corollary to addressing the question of which criticalities you teach for is that one must also address why, how, in what areas, and with who one wishes to teach for criticality, not to mention various ethical issues at individual, classroom, and institutional levels. A final point is that teaching for criticality, in many instances, is not

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something that one can write into a curriculum. It is a function of active thinking, perception, and working with the spaces afforded by institution, classroom, and material.

The tentativeness and complexity of a teacher-class-student set of relationships is well known. Adding the critical dimension to a classroom and institutional context is going to increase the complexity of classroom relations not by the value of a simple coefficient, but rather exponentially.

References

References are available upon request.

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