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Beyond the *naïve* mantra of criticality in education (research)?

Ning Chen & Fred Dervin

In a recent course on *Critical Intercultural Communication Education* given at a Finnish university, we helped our students identify misconceptions, empty discourses and ‘white lies’ in the way(s) the idea of interculturality is discussed in education (research) around the world. Concepts, methods, political and scholarly ideologies about the notion of the ‘intercultural’ were deconstructed for and with the students. We noted and demonstrated for and with them that most educators and scholars tend to ‘parrot’ words, phrases and models (amongst others) about the intercultural that have emerged from North America and Europe, and mostly from white English-speaking scholars (see Dervin, 2016). We also explained that decision-makers are overly dependent on ready-made discourses and (somewhat empty) incantations to e.g., tolerate, be open-minded to, and respect people from other ‘cultures’. The students who attended the lectures were training to be teachers in Finland – a Nordic country that is often said to be the best educational system in the world, but which fairs poorly on the issue of diversity in schools.

In informal discussions at the end of the lectures and in a short questionnaire they were asked to fill in, the students shared their positive surprise at the course being so openly critical about the ‘nuts and bolts’ of a notion which is used in education worldwide. One student, who was very enthusiastic about the course, even asked: “Are you afraid of backlash from what you say from time to time multiple times every lecture? Pointing at the controversial issues. I like you being open and not scared though.” Reading through the questionnaires, filled in by the students, who would soon be teachers in Finnish schools, it became clear that the ‘critical’ perspective, which consisted in making the students aware of the fact that one can never be satisfied with the way(s) such an important notion is used, misused and abused, was new to them. Many students explained that the

lectures they had been following on different issues of education before had been taught in 'objective' ways, with 'facts' and long lists of pet theories and 'gurus' being thrown at them.

When asked what the students would remember from this course, they wrote:

- "Don't assume: ask, discuss and question!"
- "Question everything!"
- "Critical thinking. The course made me think in a more critical manner and ponder what kind of assumptions I constantly make in everyday life. I will try to learn to question more."
- "Question things, opinions, etc. even if they seem good/best option out of everything. They might 'suck' and just be easy social point scoring. Nonsense. Don't be blind. Think."
- "Rethink about your thinking?"

For the students, criticality here means: *asking questions, questioning, reconsidering one's assumptions, and unthinking*. For other students, anywhere else in the world or from a different major at the same university (amongst others), it might mean the same or something different.

Beyond the mantras?

As we can see throughout the different chapters that compose this book, calls for criticality are omnipresent today in teaching-learning, like mantras. But the kinds of criticality that are expected of people and for what purposes should they be critical are not always clear. What is evident though is that there are privileged voices in this *menagerie* of calls for criticality. In a recent review of a research project, we noticed how scholars in the Nordic countries tended to use exclusively definitions and models of criticality developed in the US to look into the learning experiences of Asian students in European higher education. This geopolitical 'travel' towards the US to examine

the case of people from the East in Europe sounded far-fetched and ideologically problematic. If we may venture a comparison: It is like assessing a learning objective at the end a course without having taught it... The mismatch between the expectations created by these definitions and models – wrongly accepted as ‘universal’ – cannot but create a gap between their own objectives and Asian students’ beliefs about, attitudes towards and practices of criticality. The students thus get treated unfairly (from *they are not critical enough!* to *they lack criticality!*) and experience some form of social injustice in education (research). *But whose criticality can assess criticality?*

The mantra of criticality is also all-pervading in education research, where it is both a way of doing research and an object of research itself. It is important to note that these two aspects overlap: as an object of research, criticality must be approached from critical perspectives and vice versa. This is, unfortunately, not always the case: a scholar might examine negatively the criticality of students and teachers from a one-sided ‘narrative’ (*a definition*) without taking into account the ways they were trained/educated, their context, their first language, etc. As the students summarized it above: *one must be critical of one’s critiques* – even and especially researchers. For Richard & Binker (1993: 39), “Critical thinking is thinking about your thinking while you’re thinking in order to make your thinking better” (NB: obviously, one can interpret ‘better’ in many different ways).

From the different chapters of this book, we see that the main problem that remains for both teaching-learning and research is: *what does criticality mean? Who has the right to define it in a certain way? Who is right? Who is wrong? Or both? Is my sense of criticality better than yours? Can we agree universally on an understanding of criticality? The answer to these questions is obviously negative: No one has the right to impose and think that their ways of doing criticality is the way.* The Chinese idiom “东施效颦” means that it is unnecessary to imitate something which is

not suitable for someone or else it will be counterproductive. Then, should criticality not be negotiated and renegotiated again and again to satisfy all those involved and be fair to them, instead of requiring that those in position of inferiority adapt to 'our' ways of thinking about criticality?

The lack of acceptance of diverse views on criticality and the fact that Western definitions and models tend to 'win' go hand in hand with recurring calls for people to be critical. One could wonder if such calls, which tend to mean "*you must be critical my way*", do not represent façade criticality: *you can be critical, but it must fit into my box of criticality* – Western criticality. Or by making criticality a standard – an obscurely neoliberal one – we are tricked into believing that we are/should be critical – while maybe we are not, or we can't be.

So, as we can see in the chapters, in order to 'do' criticality in education (research) one must discuss and (re-)negotiate the meanings that one gives to this concept, bearing in mind that one must empower those who are not privileged enough to give their views on what criticality is about. We believe that *everybody is critical* but some are deemed more critical than others – often wrongly.

As such, the West sees the Chinese as uncritical – some Chinese teachers and scholars also repeat that their students and research participants are not critical enough, following Western ready-to-think (see for instance Zhang, 2016). The 'Confucian Heritage' argument is often misused as proof. Dervin (2012) has demonstrated for instance how top Western scholars working on international Chinese students in Australia and the UK had abused this argument to support the idea that they lack criticality and creativity. However, based on her reading of the *Analects*, a collection of dialogues between Confucius and his students, Tan (2017; n. p.) reminds us that "Critical thinking, interpreted broadly as skillful, reflective, and responsible thinking that facilitates judgment is an integral component of Confucian education". Confucius himself was very critical of the norms and worldviews of his time. He neither advocated for blindfoldedly following and

respecting the hierarchy nor for mere rote-memorisation, as is often misinterpreted. What he actually preached for was active inquiry and self-examination (Tan, 2014).

Claiming and performing criticality does not mean one is really critical

We agree with Sokal (1999: 22) in his claim that “A mode of thought does not become ‘critical’ simply by attributing that label to itself, but by virtue of its content.” Claiming and performing criticality do not necessarily mean that one is ‘doing’ it. The context of Education (research) is quite specific in this sense as it is intertwined with politics and business, *no lens volens*. This has an influence on what people can do, say, argue for and be critical of... Take Finland as an example. The Nordic country’s reputation about education is often blown out of proportion, based on pushes from Edu-business, media constructions of the ‘miracle’ and ‘white lies’ from some decision-makers, politicians and researchers (Dervin, Simpson, 2019). In this context, like many other contexts, researchers take part in selling educational products and services to the rest of the world, using their research as a way of proving their ‘wonders’ (e.g. Schatz et al., 2017). Yet, when one starts selling, one must silence potential defects and problems with what one sells – thus criticality is often left aside, even when one claims to be doing it.

If we look at more scientific issues, one can find multiple examples of what we could call ‘acritical criticality’, whereby a scholar claims criticality for him/herself but loses its essence in what s/he does. When one reads publications or listens to talks at conferences it is clear that there is a lot of ‘ready-made academic thinking’ happening, in the use of concepts (e.g. community of practice, culture, translanguaging, etc.), in the use of pet theories and gurus (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu) or even in the use of cliché assertions/slogans (“travel broadens the mind”) that scholars do not necessarily

criticize but swallow blindly, etc. For Nietzsche (1966: 56): “A great truth wants to be criticized not idolized” (NB: one can understand the word ‘truth’ as one wants here). A lack of criticality towards these can easily lead to us finding confirmations for what we want – uncritically...

*So, we must be critical. And to be critical must be approached from open-ended perspectives. As educators and researchers, we must accept contradictions, debates, and the symbolic violence of being questioned, of having our criticality critiqued, our certainty shaken, regardless of our status in education (research). We must also help others deal with these. This means that we must think for ourselves to avoid being enslaved by pet theories, gurus and analytical stereotypes (amongst others) and to stop thinking that ‘our’ criticality is better than others’. Another vital aspect is that we must think multilingually when we do education (research) to avoid some forms of simplification related to mistranslation – simplifications that can cancel out criticality. Finally, it is our duty to be critical towards our own knowledge, ideologies and positions, towards what we take for granted and to strive for change. *Change is and should be the only basis of education (research) and it is through criticality that we can do it.**

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