

Representing critical reflections in teacher education

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This critical action research study explores the professional growth of a middle school teacher and two teacher educators. It focuses on a professional development program in which one author (Bev) had the role of student, one of teacher (Peter), and one of the teacher's 'critical friend' (David). The program's epistemology was based on Habermas' theory of 'knowledge and human interests', emphasising the 'emancipatory' interest's potential for creating empowering learning environments. The teaching and learning roles of the participants, with their professional development and new understandings, are explored with reference to a 'critical incident' that sparked this inquiry. Narrative accounts are used to explore the sometimes conflicting meanings constructed by the authors, highlighting the complex nature of their educative discourses and problematising notions of emancipatory curriculum and student empowerment.

Introduction: An evening seen from three perspectives

Teachers often learn a great deal by reflecting on their experiences. Experience itself, however, is much more slippery than we often assume - the different emphases and meanings constructed by each of the participants in this study demonstrate the complexity of educational contexts. This paper explores the professional growth and development of three teachers over a 12-month period, through critical reflection on our personal written accounts of a 'critical incident' that occurred one evening in the early weeks of a one-semester professional development course for middle school teachers.

This paper would, perhaps, be simpler to read and understand if we were able to begin with a clear, simple account of the critical incident that sparked it. However, our individual accounts are so different that it would be possible to derive only a 'lowest common denominator' description of events. Such an account would necessarily be so impoverished of meaning that it would not support rich investigation and discussion. We have chosen instead to juxtapose our separate accounts, to reflect tentatively on them, and to allow readers to develop their own readings of the critical incident.

Peter - the university teacher - prepared this impressionistic account (van Maanen, 1988) one year after the evening of the critical incident to describe both the 'critical incident' that sparked our inquiry and its context:

As I trudged alone along the black wet path that led from the main school building, skirted around the new gymnasium, and emptied into the expanses of the distant car park, I couldn't help feeling wounded despite my attempts to rationalise what had happened during the last two hours. The futility of furnishing this silly small umbrella in a vain attempt to gain a measure of protection from the driving rain magnified the sense of despair that darted between my stoic defences... Part of my mind raced through a retrospective of possibilities. The remaining part scanned the future as I pulled myself deeper into the folds of the umbrella, peered through the darkness towards my car, and regretted the invisible minefield of puddles that lay around me. Would there be a way of avoiding a drenching as I juggled car keys, umbrella, box of books and bag while opening the car door? Would there be a way of avoiding 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' in next week's class as I juggled my teaching goals for student empowerment and reflective thinking with whatever expectations the students might be harbouring? One thing was certain: the level of discontent, including mine, couldn't get much worse than tonight. Why had this occurred and

why tonight?

The government-controlled middle school sited in Perth's recently developed outer metropolitan area had opened under a revolutionary banner only a month earlier. With an 'integrated curriculum' philosophy, a code of ethics that enshrined respect and care as guiding principles for teacher-student relationships, and an organisational structure centred around collaborative planning and teaching, the school promised much. I had been delighted and more than a little awed when I accepted the invitation of the school administration to teach my Curriculum course to interested teachers. As it turned out, I was teaching largely 'out of field'; only two of the eight teachers who enrolled were specialist high school science or mathematics educators. The others were art, music, and English specialists with a mix of primary and secondary level teaching experience. Walking into the first class, I felt rather apprehensive about the daunting prospect of modelling exemplary teaching practice to such a diverse group of professional educators.

David - a Doctoral student and Peter's 'critical friend' - recorded independently his impressions of the evening's key events two days later:

This was quite an astonishing session, particularly in the light of the past two very positive ones. The intended agenda was left completely, in a wide-ranging and sometimes quite hostile discussion of the technical interest and its application to schooling. Bev, particularly, seemed quite threatened, and therefore lashed out, suggesting that Peter's description of the course was 'a farce', in that it claimed to eschew a technical focus, while in fact having a strong technical focus. (Geelan 4-1995)

Bev - a school teacher and student in the course taught by Peter - construed the events and the tone quite differently: as a positive and valuable exploration of the ideas presented, which led to clearer understanding and a decrease in her frustration with the course. Bev's account also identifies influences and frustrations arising in the school itself, of which David and Peter were unaware:

The teaching role at [Clifftop] was very challenging and the university programme offered reflective time to consider the implications of our daily events and trying to place them against theoretical perspectives. As the semester progressed and problems arose, many staff noted some sort of professional crisis at about April of the year. I was enjoying the reflective opportunities of the course yet my day to day teaching role was weighing heavy on my mind. I found strategies that had worked previously were now not and I felt that my needs were not being met in the classroom. It took a lot of soul searching and examination to see how and why these problems had surfaced which I now account to not only the clientele we teach but the arrangement of the school structure which made my role very much like a 'relief' teacher.

At the same time we were completing a reading from a Shirley Grundy (1987) text that was quite deep and trying to make sense of Habermas' three interests. I found that in the presentation of the interests I could not visualise them as distinct entities. I was being frustrated by my own inability to categorise them as I perceived that I was expected to. My frustration arose at trying to separate something that could not be separated, to see a distinct difference to coexisting states. I recall one evening in particular where in order to try and make sense of the information. I began to challenge it, via Peter Taylor, with the problems that I was having with attaining a firm understanding of it. From later class reflections and the end of semester evaluation I believe that Peter may have personalised the questions I had of the information which was not my intention. It was to challenge the information itself. (Day, 3a-1996)

Peter now presents his reconstruction of the key events of that evening:

What had happened during that class held in Week Six? I abandoned my teaching plan to respond to a vigorous and unanticipated attack from several students. What was the focus of their discontent? The essence of the criticism was as follows. Bruce[1] complained about an inability to understand the theoretical framework of the course (i.e., Habermas' 3 interests as presented by Grundy). Roger argued that the technical interest was redundant because positivism had been demolished intellectually in the academic community. Bev regarded the negative image of the technical interest portrayed by Grundy as an implied attack on her own teaching practice where the technical interest had an inevitable presence. Fiona argued

that she did not want to be confined to the 3 interests framework but to go beyond it and explore alternative theories.

But it was not simply a critique of the Habermasian framework with which I had to contend. Bev also criticised my teaching approach, particularly my assessment-related requirement to construct a portfolio; she felt that I was being duplicitous in 'playing down' the importance of the portfolio whereas it had a central role in the course. (Taylor, 3-1996)

Digression: Knowledge and human interests

The evening class in which the 'critical incident' that sparked this inquiry occurred was part of a professional development program concerned with a critical theory approach to curriculum. Key organising ideas for the course were derived from the work of Jurgen Habermas (1972, 1987). We think it's important for the reader to have some familiarity with these ideas, because in a sense they provided both the 'content' of the course and a framing discourse about the events and the attitudes of each of the participants.

Mezirow (1981), in describing and interpreting Habermas' ideas and applying them in educational contexts, describes them this way:

Habermas differentiates three generic areas in which human interest generates knowledge. These areas are "knowledge constitutive" because they determine categories relevant to what we interpret as knowledge. They also determine the mode of discovering knowledge and for establishing whether knowledge claims are warranted. Three distinct but interrelated learning domains are suggested by Habermas' three primary cognitive interests - the technical, the practical and the emancipatory. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 143-144)

Mezirow describes the technical mode as being related to the human interest of 'work', the practical to 'interaction' and the emancipatory to 'power'.

The technical mode is "based on empirical knowledge, and is governed by technical rules." (Mezirow, 1981, p. 144) This mode is the one used in the natural sciences, and is also the mode on which much of the "process-product" (Shulman, 1986) research on teaching has been based. It is concerned with predictable, observable events, which can be explained or described by general rules. These rules can be discovered through correctly applied quantitative experiments and generalised to similar cases.

The practical mode is concerned with human relationships and communication, with the building of consensual understandings and norms for action.

This understanding and mode of inquiry has as its aim not technical control and manipulation but rather the clarification of conditions for communication and intersubjectivity. It is not the methods of the empirical-analytical sciences which are appropriate to this task but systematic inquiry which seeks the understanding of meaning rather than to establish causality. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 144)

Practical actions, therefore, are those which extend human communication and understanding, and allow for the improved construction of shared meanings. The qualitative/interpretive tradition in research on teaching is based on the assumption that humans (both teachers and students) do not fall under the necessary conditions of predictability which are required for research in the objective technical mode, and must therefore be studied in the intersubjective practical mode.

Emancipatory actions involved self-knowledge and reflection on the effects of one's lived experience, and the problematising of power structures with a view to emancipation from the inequities. This mode is related to the empowering of human beings through the critique of ideologies.

Gore and Zeichner (1991) use the term "critical" rather than "emancipatory", however their definitions of the three modes are similar to those of Mezirow. They offer this definition of the three modes of reflection:

First, in technical reflection, the concern is with the efficiency and effectiveness of the means used to attain ends which themselves remain unexamined. Second, in practical reflection, the task is one of explicating and clarifying the assumptions and predispositions underlying teaching activity and in assessing the adequacy of the educational goals toward which the activity leads. Finally, critical reflection incorporates moral and ethical criteria into the discourse about practical action. Here the major concern is with whether educational goals, activities and experiences lead toward forms of life that are characterised by justice, equity, caring and compassion. (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p. 122-123)

Good lesson/Bad lesson

One question which arose immediately out of these accounts when they were juxtaposed in this way was "How is it that Peter recalled the evening in such black colours, while Bev remembers it as a quite positive episode?" In a discussion one year later, we explored the issue of whether, on balance we had seen the events as good or bad at the time, and of how we saw them with the benefit of twelve months hindsight:

David: The interesting thing is that although it wasn't terribly comfortable for you (Peter) they were engaged learners, they were into it.

Bev: See, I was actually surprised when at the end of term that you had sort of thought that, that was a bad night, I actually thought it was a really good night.

Peter: Isn't that interesting.

Bev: Because to me it was where I got the opportunity to work out what on earth this thing was about. In fact I really liked that night because I felt that I really learnt something that night and felt like I was active that night. (Geelan, Taylor & Day, 3-1996)

As we write this paper, Peter has come to construe the evening in a more positive light. Although he acknowledges that it was quite painful at the time, he has learned a considerable amount from the experience. David, too, sees the events as valuable, particularly in drawing his and Peter's attention to shortcomings of Grundy's (1987) text, and in clarifying their understanding of Habermas's scheme. Bev continues to value the understandings she gained:

Since the evening in April I went on to form a sound understanding of the information in the course... Overall I have very positive memories of the growth I experienced in the last fifteen months. (Day, 3b-1996)

Alternative readings

Not long after the event, the presence of a variety of related but different 'readings' - in a literary theory sense - of the events of that evening was becoming clear to us. David describes four such alternative readings in his reflective notes. These were written two days after the episode, after discussing the events and emotions of the evening with Peter:

Confidence struck me as a central point which simmered below the whole session. The fact that Bev felt threatened, possibly because she lacked confidence in the 'validity' of her work in light of the critical scheme, is contrasted with her confidence in attacking you, clearly a powerful figure within the context of the group... Bev's case shows that these judgements are not simple - she lacked confidence in one sphere, but not in all.

The issue of expertise, which was also raised in the discussion, seems to me to be linked with confidence: one definition of an expert is a person who is confident enough to trust his or her own judgement, not that of the instructor.

Your alternative reading - that some learners had become empowered enough to exercise 'critical voice' without becoming mature enough to be concerned with politeness and relationship - seemed very

plausible. It gave me a valuable way of looking at the situation in different terms.

Your suggestion that what we faced was a re-assertion of the technical interest was plausible to me.
(Geelan, 4-1995)

As we write this paper, we feel that it is more valuable to hold a variety of readings in a 'dialectical tension' than to choose one as the 'true' description of the events and their meanings. Each perspective adds richness to our understanding of a complex situation, much as several perspectival drawings can add richness to our knowledge of a three-dimensional object. Yet, this analogy is not a strong one when considering a social event: with a change of perspective, the 'object' of study itself changes (Bauersfeld, 1988). In writing this paper, the objects of study chosen deliberately by Peter and David are the problematic 'authority' of Grundy's (1987) text, which we believe was instrumental in precipitating the critical incident, and Peter's 'solution' of portraying an ideal state as the 3 interests 'being in balance', a strategy that he designed in response to the critical incident.

The authority of texts

Firstly, Peter describes his decision to use Grundy's (1987) book:

With encouragement from the school's administration, I decided almost at the last moment to use the textbook 'Curriculum: Product or Praxis?', written by Shirley Grundy (1987). I had used the book before but had abandoned it largely because of the difficulties experienced by students in making sense of the densely-written text punctuated frequently by specialised terminology. Since then, however, I had not found a better alternative and, with some misgivings, decided to give Grundy 'another go'. (Taylor, 4-1996)

It's clear that Peter had his misgivings about the use of this particular text. Yet his critical attitude toward the text - and toward texts in general - did not seem to 'come across' to the students. The text, having been presented (as from Mt Sinai!) by the university teacher, takes on an inviolable aspect: as Bev said "If the lecturer gives it to you, you assume they think it's good and that you should accept it" (Private conversation).

The group's response to the text consisted generally of a degree of intimidation and confusion but, by the time of the critical incident, Bev's critique had become cogent and focused. She felt that Grundy had been overly negative about and dismissive of the 'technical' interest. Grundy also appeared to identify the technical interest with activities designed to produce 'products'. As an Art teacher, Bev found this denigration of the technical interest both threatening and implausible:

I know that we all probably...struggled with the chapter from Shirley Grundy and I actually really believe that her presentation of the technical interest is flawed in that she seems to totally devalue it and I don't think you can have any of the other interests without it, I don't think it is possible to. So partly it was trying to come to terms with the information and apply it to something useful, because without being able to understand it and apply it it was useless, so it was theoretical nonsense unless it could be applied and I guess where I was using the university course and my own classroom stuff as examples was trying to make sense of it in a realistic manner. So the Art teaching is the product or the university portfolio is the product...I was trying...to needle out what was actually being meant and I still believe that is the basic problem I had with the information was that it was saying..."come into this Utopia where everything is empowered" and you can't, you can't get there without the rest as well. (Geelan, Taylor & Day, 3-1996)

Balance or tension?

From our current perspectives, it seems clear that both Grundy's and Peter's portrayal of the three 'knowledge-constitutive interests' was, itself, 'unbalanced'. In attempting to redress the imbalance in modern Western culture, both emphasised the emancipatory interest excessively. In the process they were dismissive of - or actively negative about - the technical interest, and neglected to describe fully and develop the practical interest. Yet, the technical interest, as Bev was clearly aware, is an essential pre-condition for the other two interests.

It is widely acknowledged amongst critical theorists that the technical interest has been dominant to a damaging extent in Western society, however in attempting to redress this dominance, it is important to avoid the error of describing the 'Utopia' - entirely free of technical concerns - which Bev perceived in the text. Further, it could be suggested that by subordinating the practical interest to the emancipatory, rather than exploring it fully, a distortion was introduced into the groups' understanding of Habermas' scheme: a misunderstanding which contributed significantly to the 'critical incident' described.

It is possible also that the metaphor of finding an appropriate 'balance' between the 3 interests, which was explicitly used by Peter, is not an appropriate one. To use a related analogy, it's impossible to place stones on one side of a set of scales, and love on the other side: things which are different in kind do not necessarily balance one another. The metaphor of a 'dialectical tension' between the three (incommensurable?) interests, in which each restrains the excesses and 'questions the answers' of the others, seems to us to offer a richer and more powerful scheme for understanding and transforming educative relationships amongst teachers and students.

Conclusion: Re-imagining the practical interest

David had some concerns about Grundy's presentation of the 'practical' interest, feeling that she had emphasised open, unfettered communication at the expense of Habermas' other emphasis - on the building of trusting, caring communicative relationships. He felt that this had contributed to the 'two-edged' nature of students' understanding of this interest:

In characterising the practical interest, I felt that it really had two facets: the removal of institutional and power-based obstructions to communication, and a concern for developing caring, communicative relationships. One possible 'reading' of Bev's behaviour is that the course had been very successful in the first of these facets - she felt able to point out perceived shortcomings of the course and of Peter's teaching - but that it had failed to facilitate Bev's development of the kind of concern for the feelings of others and for mutually caring relationships which is also an important facet of empowerment. In this sense, empowerment was a two-edged sword: it had been presented in ways which supported some facets of the practical (communicative) interest, but apparently did not support other, equally important facets. (Geelan, 3-1996)

One way in which Peter and David have been supported in developing our current perspectives is through reading Sockett's (1993) "The moral base for teacher professionalism". He speaks of five "professional virtues" which characterise morally well-grounded teaching practice: courage, care, fairness, honesty and practical wisdom. His notion of care, which draws on that of Nel Noddings (1984), seemed to us to encapsulate that side of the practical interest which had been glossed over or lost in the rush toward emancipation.

We now feel that, rather than being the ideal state, the emancipatory interest is most powerful when it serves the practical interest. Its critical focus on the removal of barriers and distortions to effective communication is a means toward Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas, 1987) - the more complete development of the practical interest in caring, moral, and open communication. If teachers and learners are to truly communicate, to create collaboratively new meanings, ideas and understandings, then relationships of trust and mutual respect must be built. This involves the avoidance of such negative behaviours as coercion, sarcasm and destructive criticism, but is most fully embodied where all members of a teaching/learning group are committed to the development of caring educative relationships. It may well be that critical voices have their greatest impact when these conditions flourish.

We still have different perspectives both on the events of that evening in April, and on the continuing importance and usefulness of the Habermasian scheme in our lives. One thing we have learned in common is the importance of caring, of practical wisdom, and of relationships in learning communities.

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Note

1. All names used, except those of Peter, David and Bev, are pseudonyms. This includes the name given to the school.

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