

CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY-IN-ACTION: POWER AND PRAXIS

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Abstract

Hermeneutical analysis of interview texts from six feminist and critical pedagogues suggests that these educators engage in a pedagogical process that includes a (1) critical worldview, (2) a process of transformation, and (3) a transformative intent. For them, an analysis of power is the crux of a philosophy-in-action.

Résumé

Une analyse herméneutique des textes d'entrevues de six féministes et critiques pédagogiques suggère que ces éducatrices sont engagées dans un processus pédagogique comprenant: (1) une critique d'une perspective universelle, (2) un processus de transformation, et (3) un dessein de transformation. Pour elles, l'analyse du pouvoir est l'essence même d'une philosophie active.

Introduction

Praxis...is, in my favourite part of the exegesis, the central concept of a philosophy that did not want to remain a philosophy, philosophy becoming practical (Lather, 1991, p. 11).

The relationship of philosophy to practice of teaching in higher education is the focus of this article. Six university instructors who identify themselves as feminist or critical pedagogues are drawn from a larger research study which begins with the assumption that one's philosophy drives one's teaching practice or, put another way, teaching constitutes "philosophy-in-action".¹ Studying the interplay of espoused philosophy and philosophy-in-use allows us to illuminate the complexities of teaching in higher education and provides opportunities for critical reflection about practice.

Although many of the issues raised and strategies used by this group are shared by other concerned and committed professors, this group is unique in their over-riding concern with the power dynamics in our society. Starting from a philosophical perspective grounded in critical theory which interrogates systems of power and domination, the analysis of power, both within and outside the classroom, permeates classroom process, content and structure, while empowerment or transformation is the ultimate aim. In a recent article, Briskin and Coulter (1992) also note that "dynamics of power and empowerment

¹ This is an adoption and adaptation of Christopher Hodgkinson's 1991 treatment of educational leadership as philosophy/values-in-action.

are intricately intertwined. Student empowerment, therefore, will depend upon negotiating, not avoiding, the power dynamics..." (p. 259). The essential strategy of a critical teaching practice is, therefore, one of critique. "Critique calls for a special and suspicious interpretation of those ideologies and institutions which support and maintain ruling power structures" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 240). In these classrooms, students don't *get* information, they challenge it!

These comments are not intended to imply that feminist and critical pedagogues are a homogeneous group devoid of differences. On the contrary, while the similarities are striking, the pedagogical differences within this group reflect the importance of diversity even within the margins. Some of these instructors are studying the intersection between postmodernism and feminism or critical theory; others focus on more liberal orientations to equal opportunity and rights. Their classroom practices differ with more or less inclusion of traditional methods and the way they experience their relationship to the university community varies. While we acknowledge these differences, in this article, we wish to elucidate the shared practices of a critical philosophy-in-action, whether based on feminism or critical social theory. By highlighting these particular participants, we hope to give voice to those whose "very existence creates a space" for alternative theoretical discourses and pedagogical approaches, i.e., praxis, within our academic institutions.

It seems that the feminist and critical educators in this study understand the essence of pedagogy to be "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce" (Lusted, cited in Lather, 1991, p. 15).

Research Design

Two critical and four feminist participants are part of a group of fourteen instructors in a large university in western Canada who were selected in purposive sampling to represent a cross-section of espoused philosophies as well as some diversity of disciplines and faculties. Invitational letters were sent to a list generated by reputation and from Women's Studies networks and two ads soliciting volunteers were placed in the campus faculty newspaper. The six participants who espouse a critical or feminist perspective are the focus of this paper.

The five women and one man in this group teach in the following university departments: English, Sociology, Physical Education, Canadian Studies, Family Studies and Educational Foundations. Additionally, the four feminists are or have been involved in the University's Women's Studies program. Three are new professors with less than four years experience at the university and three have been teaching at the university for 10 - 20 years. They teach both graduate and undergraduate classes which range in size from 20 to 200 students. None of these professors are members of minority groups.

Participants were each interviewed twice in one hour interviews before and after a classroom observation. The semi-structured, conversational interviews

included dialogue on the meaning each participant attempted to give to his/her practice. The purpose of the first interview was to gather general information about the instructor's pedagogy. The instructors provided information about what they did in the classroom, why they did it and whether it produced the effects they desired. The second interview drew on the class observation and the first interview to verify, embellish, and probe more deeply into their pedagogy. Interview transcripts and observation field notes became the texts used for interpretation.

Hermeneutical Analysis

In an attempt to understand what the professors told us about their practice, we revisited the assumptions, beliefs, and theories that constitute their philosophy of teaching. During the process of interpreting philosophical categories, we recognized that these six educators were decidedly different from the other professors in the study in terms of their espoused philosophy. Starting from the assumption that the philosophical orientation influences teaching practice, we began asking a series of questions of the data. For instance, how are their particular assumptions about society and about teaching and learning acted upon? If transformation is so crucial to these instructors, how do they promote it? What do they actually *do* in the classroom that is different from other professors? What are their concerns? Through repeated interrogation of the transcripts, pieces of text emerged that were common across the six participants. Several themes developed as we attempted to make sense of these commonalities. Each textual unit was then reviewed again in the context of the original sentence and paragraph in order to interpret if the intended meaning contributed accurately to the emerging whole. The analysis process could be described in this way:

The meaning of the part is only understood within the context of the whole; but the whole is never given unless through an understanding of the parts. Understanding therefore requires a circular movement from parts to whole and from whole to parts (Gallagher, 1992, p. 59).

We found ourselves in a hermeneutical circle! As each new part was compared to a growing whole, the whole became something new. Through intuitive hunches and dialogue, we constantly revised the emerging themes and every interpretation involved a recasting of meaning. Embedded within the themes, a description of a pedagogical process seemed to emerge.

Findings: The Pedagogical Process

The rich information shared by these participants could be presented in a variety of ways. For this paper, we have chosen to highlight an interpretation which suggests that these professors engage in a pedagogical process which has three major, interrelated elements: (1) a critical worldview, (2) a process of transformation, and (3) a transformative intent.

A Critical Worldview

Starting from a personally and theoretically based worldview, feminist and critical pedagogues clearly articulate their assumptions about the world and about education. Their espoused philosophy drives their choices regarding process, content and classroom structure and orients them to emancipatory action. Influenced by the critical social sciences, critical pedagogy examines and challenges existing power structures. Critical pedagogues assume that there is a link between knowledge, language and power and ascribe to the belief that knowledge is a social construction rather than a universal "truth". They believe that the dominant culture constructs hegemonic views which become taken-for-granted. Once these views are assimilated, people become deluded about the nature of their own realities (Grundy, 1987; McLaren, 1989; Shor & Freire, 1987). One of the two critical instructors in this study assumes that we live in an "inequitable society" in which the distribution of power is based on class, race and gender; the other believes that "students have been socialized to absorb unquestioned oppressive notions" and to "resist critique". Both of these instructors provide a forum for students in the classroom to examine their taken-for-granted assumptions and "critically reflect on society's messages". Critical educators assert that education cannot be neutral but rather is always a political act. Teaching and learning should be a catalyst for fundamental social change and personal/social transformation (Grundy, 1987; McLaren, 1989; Shor & Freire, 1987). The study's adult education instructor feels that the political nature of education is epitomized within his own profession where the "classroom is the site of the struggle". The family studies professor envisions that a change in parent's, teacher's and child care worker's ways of interacting with children will contribute to social change.

Feminist pedagogy draws on critical pedagogy as well as concepts from the women's movement. While an analysis of power also characterizes feminist teaching, feminists are unique in their attention to gender as an historical basis for inequality and oppression (Briskin, 1990). Feminist professors in this study are concerned about changing "structures of thought" and "existing beliefs". They are keenly aware of the resistance that is engendered by introducing "risky" content covering such areas as racism, sexism and homophobia. For them, it is important that this material in their own words, be "negotiated" to challenge "received wisdom" and promote critique. They aim for "awareness" or "consciousness-raising" that has future effects in thought and action. True to the action orientation of the women's movement, these participants report a political perspective both within and beyond the classroom which is integral to their pedagogy. They believe it is the "responsibility of feminists" that "political commitment is built into intellectual practice and the pursuit of knowledge". For example, one professor has been a visible and vocal advocate regarding sexual harassment on campus while another uses writing and presenting as tools to promote awareness and critique. These forms of "political work" are intended to "disrupt the power dynamics" within the institution.

Particularly integral to their mode of teaching are the feminist and critical educators' assumptions about the roles of teacher and learner. Knowing that the teacher/student relationship is imbued with the same power dynamics which are observable in the rest of society, these teachers recognize their institutionalized authority. In the words of one professor: "I take authority for granted; I am the teacher". While they recognize these authoritative influences, they also challenge them. There is a profound respect for the student's experience and ability. One professor flatly stated "I am not the expert", while another views "the learner as the authority on their life". Simultaneously holding a belief in students as "active agents" and a recognition of their own knowledge, skill and experience, the professors reject the traditional notion of teacher as expert and instead view themselves as "co-learners" with additional resources and search for "various ways to break down the barriers between students and teachers without abdicating the responsibility of the professor".

A Process of Transformation

Pedagogical choices made by these instructors reflect both commitment and constraint: (a) a commitment to challenge traditional teaching practices and (b) the constraints imposed by the traditional system within which they must practice their alternative pedagogies. Commitment is exemplified through the methods and strategies employed by these professors which include: (1) a consciousness-raising process, (2) power issues as content, and (3) the structuring of a critical classroom. Institutional constraints are identified throughout.

A consciousness-raising process. Professors repeatedly identify a number of interactive *process* elements which seem vital to the educational endeavour as they envision it. Dialogue is actively encouraged in various forms including argument or debate, although the instructors caution that they must be ready to intercede or moderate when needed. Promoting dialogue requires conscious attempts to "equalize the power" in the classroom and provide small group experiences. Instructors who teach large classes particularly lament the lack of opportunity for dialogue between students. Dialogue, journal writing and reflective papers are used to promote critical reflection. The words of one instructor echo the view of others: "I teach them throughout the class to identify values, beliefs and assumptions and...they analyze and critique those values, beliefs and assumptions". Part of this process includes the strategy of problematization. Students are asked to "pause and rethink" or "interrogate their experience" while professors "raise problems...[in] received wisdom", "yank at their assumptions", and "ask the tough questions". This "uncomfortable kind of questioning" is explicitly intended to "destabilize people's perspectives". There is an underlying belief that "conflict and struggle" are important in the process of transformation. During this process, students may become "bothered", overwhelmed or angry. One Women's Studies professor challenges the traditional "feel good" notion of learning and believes that "...at least certain kinds of learning may happen more readily if you *don't* feel good". This implies

an engagement with the learning process that "moves beyond academic analysis" to "connect the emotional and the intellectual". The whole process is intended to "get them down to the next layer underneath that, to peel back that next layer".

Predictably, students often display resistance to the non-traditional, critical approach as well as to the content. Based on her experience, the feminist literature professor believes that conflict and resistance is an expected phase of the consciousness-raising process and that a full year is required to "synthesize" the feelings and information generated.

Such a process clearly cannot be negotiated without institutional support such as the full year course just mentioned, small class size (or adjunct seminars) and an optimum amount of scheduled class time. This type of structural support is often lacking and contributes to the frustration felt by these pedagogues. For example, one professor believes that three hour sessions are needed in order to engage in transformative critique. Yet, she is constrained by timetabling issues which force her to compress important concepts into 50 minute blocks of time. While she firmly states that "if the structure interferes with learning, then, to me, the structure ought to be challenged", at the same time, she is aware that "...I can only fight so many battles at once".

Power issues as content. In both the feminist and critical classrooms, *content* centres on a critical analysis of the power relations of race, gender and sexuality. "One of the things I try to do is make power a theme". The literature or course texts are chosen to present the information and generate the emotion that will bring theory to life. Students "read literature about oppression" in a family studies class, such as *Killers of the Dream* (by Lillian Smith), fiction that "doesn't let you off the hook" in a women's writing course, such as *Jane Eyre* (by Charlotte Bronte), or autobiography, such as *Beloved* (a slave woman narrative by Toni Morrison). The adult education instructor who provides opportunities to sample "multiple perspectives" hopes that his students will "leave with a sense that these different pedagogical styles are always implicated with power". The professor of a large introductory sociology course hopes that her lectures which introduce a feminist or "critical perspective" to the work of the traditional theorists will reveal the hidden assumptions behind the theories. To aid in processing such content, these instructors sometimes "take more time with a smaller amount of material", offer choice regarding the issues that will be covered and supplement with seminars whenever possible.

Societal power dynamics are specifically exemplified through the conscious "thematization", analysis and critique of the power and authority implicit in the relationship between professor and student. Seating arrangements and discussion methods are problematized and reflect a decentering of authority or an attempt to "lessen the power differences between us". For example, one instructor often avoids sitting at the end of the table in a seminar classroom. Another places the desks in a complete circle and invites a quick "gut response" to the text from everyone in turn before proceeding to general discussion.

From this perspective, evaluation and grading are viewed as particularly problematic and, again, thematized as power issues. While conscious of the undeniable authority invested in the evaluative process, instructors use many and varied means to cope with this contradiction. In general, they attempt to decrease competition and enhance choice-making. Most involve the students in generating exam questions or offer choices in essay topics. The instructor's evaluation is sometimes "tempered" with self and/or peer evaluation. Most attempt to stimulate critical thinking and personal engagement through both graded and non-graded assignments. One professor encourages the students to write repeated drafts for supportive feedback before grading. Journals are encouraged but usually not graded or not read. One professor includes an expectation of "passion, voice and commitment" in the written work and another assigns a "personal reflections paper" to encourage analysis of the student's past, present and future experience. The professor who is required to use multiple choice exams in a class of 200 expresses her scepticism and hopes to evaluate in more depth those students who move on to smaller, senior classes.

One critical pedagogue describes the three forms of knowledge (i.e., technical, interpretive and critical) identified by Jurgen Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1987) and uses strategies which attempt to evaluate each of these legitimate domains of knowledge. For instance, mid-term and final exams test technical knowledge, while student journals reveal meaning interpretations and the personal reflections paper requires more critical thought.

Structuring a critical classroom. A combination of traditional and alternative structures characterizes the critical and feminist classroom environment. Most of these instructors are aware that students have been socialized to expect the teacher to provide the structure and authority in the classroom. When the teacher does not assume this role, students are often distressed or annoyed. One instructor poignantly asks: "How uncomfortable are you allowed to make people?" Therefore, all provide some structure and initiation but "ease them into" tolerating less structure and include "time to grope". Consistent with their assumption that education is a political process, these instructors feel that it is important to state their own views clearly, rather than assuming a neutral stance in the classroom. One of the instructors senses her students' relief when she openly identifies herself as a feminist.

The feminist and critical pedagogues in this study tend to "have a fundamental belief in risk" as an essential element in the transformative process. Therefore, they structure their classrooms in ways that promote risk-taking. The most profound example of this is their own willingness to "be brave", to model vulnerability through their choice of "risky material" that explores "contentious issues", their engagement with confrontation, conflict and resistance, and their openly self-reflective approach. They comment: "Teaching is a means for clarifying my own thoughts; I try to make that transparent to students" and "I ask questions but I don't just ask them of them...they're my own questions as well". While all of these instructors are "always reflective"

about their pedagogy, some admit to "flying by the seat of my pants" and another reveals that "I trust in intuition...I work with my heart".

But professors pay a price for structuring their classrooms in this manner. They must continually "negotiate the resistance" even in classrooms with "like-minded" students. They understand that angry, attacking behaviour must not be personalized but "named". The constant confrontation of contradictions and open "self-consciousness" may result in fatigue or isolation. One states, "It is quite daunting, in many ways, to try and deal with this kind of material in a reflective way when dealing with it may imply that you actually are caught in a contradiction all the time". Yet, their commitment "creates its own energy" and makes "the system change". One instructor discusses the influence of self-doubt. In response to a respected colleague's feedback, she presented information in class more "neutrally", avoiding the so-called negativity of critical reflection. She believes that this delayed or curtailed the insight usually gained by students as they study family dynamics. Hence, this experience re-confirmed her commitment to a critical pedagogical approach.

Although they clearly value and promote a certain level of discomfort, these professors are also aware that "students have to feel safe to be candid". They are all committed to "find ethical ways of dealing with each other around issues that are really highly contentious sometimes". Like many other caring professors, they speak of trust, respect, validation, empathy and safety. Their "comments are...supportive and affirming", they "remain sensitive to individual students" and ensure that "no one *has* to speak". Likewise, they wish to promote a "sense of groupness", a "shared experience" and relationships between students and professor as well as among students themselves.

Transformative Intent

Critical and feminist educators are concerned about both personal and social change. Constrained by the university setting, they focus more directly on transformation of individual consciousness. They hope to "facilitate critical enlightenment" or "enable...transformation within the group". For them, this means that students "will see the way that structures of thought and exclusion work" and "make those applications to their own histories". They realize that "ideological change" reflects integration and synthesis of information and insight. Some professors also articulate their intention that students act upon this transformation in the social world. They anticipate an effect on self and family and a desire for "moving on" and "social change". One instructor senses that critique leads to enlightenment which provides hope and energy for future action.

But these instructors are critically aware that a concrete action component is missing in their classroom work. "Unfortunately, I think, the limitation of a classroom setting is that we *don't* go from there to do any kind of political change". They attempt to mitigate this somewhat through reflection, discussion,

assignments and textual material which focus on "strategies for social change", hopefully to be applied in the future.

However, some instructors admit that they "don't know how that will translate in [the students'] personal lives". Most understand that they cannot control the student's process of change; "every student has their own answers, their own timing...everybody's gonna see things differently, in a different time, in a different way and I can't predict when that will be". Another concedes: "It's naive to think that all people are transformed; some people are not going to change".

Summary and Conclusions

For the feminist and critical educators in this study, power is the crux of a philosophy-in-action. That is, while they espouse philosophical views about the unequal distribution of power in society, these professors simultaneously act upon this through their awareness, problematization and critique of the power structures within the educational institution. They hold assumptions about the interplay between knowledge and power which challenge traditional views about the teacher/student relationship. While recognizing the explicit authority bestowed by the institution and the implicit authority granted by virtue of their knowledge and experience, they also value the expertness and autonomy of learners. They view their pedagogical methods as similarly power-laden. They use their classroom authority to establish process, content and structural elements which promote disequilibrium so that students begin to challenge their existing hegemonic belief systems. The transformative intent is ultimately political.

These instructors are keenly aware of the perilousness of their position within the classroom and the institution due to their risky approaches. They face consequences for the practice of their pedagogy such as isolation, labelling, resistance and personal fatigue. One professor reminds us of the poignant contradictions facing these instructors on a daily basis: "When we're stuck in institutions doing some of this stuff, ...we're [at] the same time complicit while we're doing the critique". Yet their commitment sustains them in the struggle. They feel a responsibility to practice their philosophy and pursue emancipatory ideals within the academy. This is the power of their praxis.

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