

Critical Thinking: Everything Old is New Again

A Historical Perspective and Philosophy of Adult Education

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Abstract

Critical thinking has been an influence on education since ancient times. The Greek idea of *paedia* provides a starting point for tracing the development of critical thinking and its intricate partnership with education. The adult educational philosophy of Stephen Brookfield can be compared and contrasted with classical models of education, revealing several similarities between a modern take on critical thinking and the classical intention. Other philosophers, such as George Hole, provide a more complex philosophical basis for the use of critical thinking in adult education that has its basis in classical ideals. Popular culture provides a third way of looking at critical thinking, and not always a complementary one. The current rush toward vocational education in place of a classical education goes hand in hand with the popular notion of specialization as the answer to societies problems. Expansion of the classical notion of *paedia* through the ideas of Brookfield and Hole would make critical thinking a powerful component of modern adult education.

Introduction

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates

How students learn is an ongoing concern of my educational philosophy, as is the study of the development of learning styles and critical thinking strategies in adult learners. People all learn differently, but are subjected to the same form of education, whether it suits their learning style or not. Not many people question established educational procedure. In the last few decades the focus in education has turned to a study of the methods by which adult students learn. It has been generally accepted that people acquire knowledge in differing ways, and adults bring a great deal of preconceived ideas to their learning. The field of educational philosophy has broken down into pedagogy and androgogy in an attempt to separate out adult learning from the methods children may use to learn. Without a solid foundation of core knowledge to draw from, neither adults nor children have the proper tools to do solid critical thinking.

A theorist that is relevant to my interests in adult education at this time is Stephen D. Brookfield. Brookfield writes about the importance of critical reflection on the part of both learners and instructors, and sees critical thinking as a part of a larger political process. Brookfield also believes that the teaching process can be used to either empower or oppress the learner. Critical reflection is the method urged by Brookfield for learners to discover the ways in which the dynamics of power invade and distort educational processes (Brookfield, 1995). Education is irrevocably tied to

the political system under which it operates. For America to have a radical change in its educational system would require a radical change in its political system. The organizational structure of most businesses falls under the classical bureaucratic model where they follow a traditional pyramidal structure -ultimate control and authority rest at the apex. This structure is familiar, comfortable, and deeply engrained in the unconscious of traditionally monotheistic societies. Hierarchies are prevalent mainly because they facilitate both monitoring and control, and firmly establish the relationship between superior and subordinate (Casson, 1994). This is one area Brookfield would like to see changed, and he discusses teachers teaching to change the world and model for their students humane justice, fairness, compassion, and understanding (Brookfield, 1995).

Brookfield can be characterized as a humanistic adult educator. Humanistic education focuses on the development of the individual as a whole person, and is concerned with the welfare of human beings in general. Well into the nineteenth century there was a humanistic approach to the public education of America's citizens. Historically based on early Greek and Roman ideals, a classical education's purpose was to give students the tools they needed to take their place in society as intelligent citizens, well educated in the morals and history of their culture, and able to pass that knowledge down to the next generation. The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century predicated a new method of education to integrate a new type of citizen into American society. Immigration brought about the need to socialize and train America's newest citizens to take their place in the factories as workers. The building of a responsible citizen was no longer the primary goal; business interests

became the driving force in public education. This acquisition of specialized information has reached a point where possession of a credential matters more than any accumulated store of knowledge, and socio-economic status measures success in life. America is on the verge of sanctioning a public education system that is little more than a vocational factory to produce interchangeable workers for a global corporate society.

One of the key ideas Brookfield alludes to but never really develops in his philosophy is the importance of a more classical education. I am referring to a classical or traditional education that focuses on the idea of the Greek *paedia*; complete instruction or culture, the idea rejuvenated by the Renaissance in the form of *uomo universale*, the universal man, who sought to develop his skills in all areas, not just in a few. Traditionally, a classical education's purpose was to give students the tools they needed to take their place in society as intelligent citizens, well educated in the morals and history of their culture, and able to pass that knowledge down to the next generation. We fail to do this because we have become a nation of specialists, and this acquisition of specialized information has reached a point where possession of a credential matters more than any accumulated store of knowledge. Socio-economic status measures success in life. The overt message coming from politicians and government agencies is that a university education carries weight in proportion to its vocational relevance. On the surface, an education's vocational relevance seems what society needs to meet the demands of a 21st century workplace. Education is becoming fragmented to the point where students cannot think in holistic terms; instead they narrow their focus so tightly into specialties that they can no

longer see the connection between their discipline and other disciplines. Traditional forms of knowledge can be dispensed in non-traditional ways, and alternative-learning styles is a method that can work for both educators and learners. Critical thinking is an important component of this method.

Brookfield believes most learners take a course in critical thinking and treat it like content whereas it's really an ongoing mental disposition -- a lifelong way of examining ourselves and our place in the world... critical thinking is the best example of what can accurately be called lifelong learning (Esterle and Clurman, 1994). This idea is not a new one; it has only been recently that education has been institutionalized. Businesses increasingly claim they want the products of a good, classical education, workers who can think critically, write creatively, and speak thoughtfully, but they continue to influence schools and universities toward vocational skills. This trend away from citizenship goals toward meeting vocational needs leaves the field of social education in a disturbing position. Teaching students to make decisions, for example, may lead to choices that are not in the perceived best interests of the corporate sector, such as those concerning union activity, consumer roles, and government limits on business activity (Passe, 2001). Corporate interests were helped greatly by the rise of progressivism and multiculturalism in schools. There was a rush away from core values. Content, and especially content authored by those of white, European descent, is no longer as valid as process. The classical tradition came under fire from two camps, one postmodernist that seeks to deconstruct the classics on the grounds of gender, race, and class, and the other pragmatic and career minded that asks what value the classics have in a computer

driven society (Fukuyama, 1998). Our sights have been lowered to mere existence, rather than raised to pursuit of the good life.

"To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?" - Cicero

Our tradition of education can be traced back to the Greco-Roman societies from which we get a great deal of the rest of our Westernized culture. As early cultures flourished and began to prosper, attention turned to the education as another means to define society. Education is a collective technique which a society employs to instruct its youth in the values and accomplishments of the civilization within which it exists (Marrou, 1956). The origins of the concept of citizenship are inextricably intertwined with the origins of Western education, and education has always revolved around discourse--around the ways we talk about and teach knowledge (Massey, 1997). Brookfield sees critical thinking as an adult learning process that describes the way we make sense out of how we live our lives and how we interpret things that happen to us (Whitman, 1994).

A classical or traditional education focuses on the Greek *paedia*; complete instruction or culture, and the Roman the approach to learning, the *trivium*; studies in grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium*; studies in arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. After all but disappearing during the Dark and Middle Ages, the idea was resurrected by the Renaissance in the form of *uomo universale*, the

universal man, who sought to develop his skills in all areas, not just in a few. An education in the liberal arts was intended toward the development of the human powers that could be turned to any intellectual endeavor (Haney, 1998).

If all citizens were to be involved in civic affairs, then all of the citizens needed decision-making capabilities to be actively engaged in society. This is where *paedia* came into being, the idea that there could be a complete education, or instruction in a culture. The Greeks wished to educate the whole man, mind, body, and soul. The cornerstone of this classical education was rhetoric. The rhetorician is competent to speak against anybody on any subject, and to prove himself more convincing before a crowd on practically every topic he wishes (Plato, trans. 1997). A student was encouraged to construct and present arguments on both sides of some controversial issue. He was not judged proficient until he could present a case as persuasive on one side as the other. This method, presumably, was designed to equip a student for any eventuality; one never knew on what side of some future issue one's interests would lie (Melchert, 1991). Drawing upon grammar, or the proper use of structuring language, and logic, a way of thinking critically, a citizen would use rhetoric to engage another citizen or even the courts in debates about issues of the day.

Vita non est vivere sed valere vita est.

(Life is more than merely staying alive)

Stephen Brookfield identifies four major components of critical thinking in his educational philosophy.

1. **Identifying and challenging assumptions.** This is a central element of Brookfield's critical thinking, the need to identify any underlying beliefs, values, or actions that we take for granted. Identification allows us to examine assumptions with an analytical eye.
2. **Challenging the importance of context.** Unexamined assumptions may shape our worldview, and context needs to be examined in order to identify their appropriateness.
3. Critical thinkers try **to imagine and explore alternatives.** Common assumptions should be explored for contextual problems and ideas outside the norm.
4. Exploring alternatives leads to **reflective skepticism.** This exploration calls for immediate suspicion of any idea that is habitual or exists in the present social structure of society (Brookfield, 1987).

Often the word critical in critical thinking has a negative connotation. It is thought of as fault finding and pessimistic. Critical in this sense means characterized by close and careful analysis, it is a set of strategies used for inquiry, problem solving, and decision-making. Philosopher George Hole (1993) identified the core components of inquiring or critical thinking as the following:

1. Identifying the basic issues

2. Clarifying meanings
3. Uncovering and making assumptions
4. Considering alternative points of view
5. Evaluating reasons, arguments, and evidence
6. Drawing and supporting conclusions

Hole's definition of critical thinking is more objective than Brookfield's, and incorporates classical tradition. Hole proposes that to better understand the process of critical thinking, that learners first apply critical thinking skills to the profound questions, that is questions that have some intellectual depth to them. Being difficult to comprehend, and often abstract, nevertheless, it can be less threatening for the new critical thinker to ask, "what is love" rather than "do you love me". After the learner becomes familiar with the critical thinking process, then closer critical thinking of one's own assumptions becomes easier. There is a foundation to build on.

Brookfield on the other hand, wishes the learner to subjugate personal feelings and examination to the social context. Central to critical thinking is placing one's own situation in a broader context so that aspects of one's problems are seen as connected to broader social forces (Brookfield, 1987). This would seem to run counter to something as psychologically basic as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, i.e., until a person can understand and appreciate his/her own motivation and situation, they should not be asked to think of the broader needs and contexts of society.

An important distinction Hole makes is beginning his critical thinking with the idea of identifying basic issues. Brookfield begins his critical thinking by wanting

to identify and challenge assumptions. Assumption cannot be properly challenged unless they are first broken down into components. What is it that we are really talking about- what makes the issue basic? Hole wants to be precise as possible about identifying the basic ideas and meanings that underlie an issue, because better understanding leads to better choices. He simplifies it down to two words: What matters?

Hole's philosophy of critical thinking goes back to the idea of a classical education and the Socratic Method, where by patient examination of an issue a true conclusion is recognized. The Socratic Method and ideas have persisted over time because of the value they bring to a culture. Socrates was one of the first to identify that knowledge is an endless process rather than a product, a process of learning to learn. This meant a person had to acquire several things; a critical attitude, improvement of aesthetic and cultural tastes, ability to test logical consistency of concepts and judgements, and investigation into unknown fields, without neglecting the heritage of the past (Bellatalla, 1998).

A famous example of this in Greek history is the Apology of Socrates, a speech Socrates delivered in his defense at a trial where he was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens with his teachings, and of not honoring the city gods. Convicted and sentenced to death, Socrates draws on logic in the dialogue Crito to explain why he will not escape his punishment. Socrates believed that the good of his soul was far more important than the transient pleasures of life. Accordingly, he preferred to die for his ideas than live as a hypocrite. An idea worth living for may be an idea worth dying for as well (Solomon, 1993).

Our schools have been scientifically designed to prevent over-education from happening. [...] The average American (should be) content with their humble role in life, because they are not tempted to think about any other role.

William Torrey Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education, 1889

A classical education was essentially an initiation into the Greek way of life, molding the child and the adolescent in accordance with national customs and submitting him to a particular style of living (Marrou, 1956). There is inevitability to this style of education; we see it repeatedly in various countries around the world. Youth are taught their culture through the educational process, sometimes as afterthought, sometimes as indoctrination. It all serves the same purpose, to unite society under one cultural banner. Education in this manner seems to parallel Sorokin's cyclical theory, that there is a point where a culture's educational pattern is no longer effective, and a change takes place as the educational processes adapt to a new pattern of culture.

The transition from a traditional to urban society had its roots in the Renaissance, but it wasn't until the Industrial Revolution around 1750 that population and the economy grew enough to sustain this new urbanized society. The Industrial Revolution created the modern worker as we understand that individual: a person who performs a particular task according to a more or less fixed set of rules. His performance is assessed in the narrow perspective of that task (Hammer, 1996). After World War II knowledge changed again and began being applied to knowledge itself. All these changes in the meaning of knowledge from the classic Greek *sophia*

(wisdom) to a cumulation of the emphasis on individual development found in the philosophy of John Dewey have resulted in a fundamental change in the way we regard education itself.

Education at this time was retooled to standardize it for the laborers that were needed for the new technology. Frederic Winslow Taylor's greatest influence was on the how workers were trained. He believed all skilled or unskilled manual work could be analyzed and organized by the application of knowledge. Instead of taking years to turn out a skilled worker by apprenticeship, by World War II, it took only 60-90 days. The acquisition of knowledge was formulized and rendered systematic. The same principles were applied to education and public schooling. It was during this period of rapid corporate growth that business interests used their power to move schools away from their primary goal of preparing students to be responsible citizens (Passe, 2001). Critical thinking fell by the wayside.

Vocational education as opposed to a classical education came to the forefront. No longer was the goal of education to produce knowledgeable citizens ready to take their place in society, now it turned to producing trained workers to take their place in the factories and technology. This attitude has given rise to a new way of thinking about education, namely that nothing can be valid as a discipline unless it has a utilitarian value. Mathematics and the sciences seem to be of little interest in themselves, valued for only the Cartesian goal of making humanity the "masters and possessors of nature".

At the dawn of the new century, when the debate about the role of universities in our society is high on the agenda, the overt message coming from politicians and

government agencies is that a university education carries weight in proportion to its vocational relevance. By promoting the professional and practical aspects of degree courses, the language of skills implicitly and inexorably downgrades the values of disciplines in the arts and humanities (Rylance and Simons, 2001). On the surface, an education's vocational relevance seems what society needs to meet the demands of a dynamic workplace. The danger lies in the fragmentation of education to the point where students are no longer taught to think in holistic terms, instead, they narrow their focus so tightly into specialties, that they cannot see the connection between their discipline and other disciplines. It appears that the technocratic, economically driven approach to reform trivializes learning by replacing the experience of intellectual growth with the scramble for a credential. In turn, employers hardly ever inquire about what a prospective employee actually learned in school. It's the credential that matters, not the knowledge (Cookson, 1998).

Knowledge is becoming increasingly fragmented, and businesses and economic status are the driving factors behind the fragmentation. When the United States Congress passes the Smith –Hughes Act of 1917, federal government began influencing the educational process away from the states by giving money to programs that promoted vocational education. With the backing of business, the fundamental goals of education in America began to change. The cost and responsibility of training workers were no longer the private concern of employers but became a function of the public sector (Casson, 1994). Instead of preparing students to take their place in society as citizens, they are being prepared to take their place in corporate culture. . Socioeconomic development is now seen as the answer

to the world's woes, despite the inability of most Third World societies to afford and apply a technological fix. The idea of vocational education as the answer to economic development has become a cornerstone of democratic planning.

By creating the impression that the new is intrinsically superior to the old, science and technology effectively dethroned tradition (Bertman, 2001). Students graduate today no longer able to understand their rights as citizens, or their place in a democratic society, or with any knowledge of the basic principles or documents America was founded on, but they program a computer or wire a house for electricity, and society accepts them as educated and applauds them as economically prosperous. Critical thinking has become devalued by those who have been conditioned to see anything intellectual as elitist.

The question becomes, if education isn't of intrinsic worth, do we really need it? Why not just train for a job and be done with it? There are urgent social reasons why we need a civil society based on reflection, critical thinking, and insight. Without a core of self-knowledge, how can we be active and engaged citizens (Cookson, 1998)? Part of the problem is that we have lost Albert Jay Nock's distinction between the formative and the instrumental- roughly between true education aimed to build a whole human life, and mere training for useful or vocational purposes. In short, the best parallel to American education today is the collapsing Soviet system: politicized allocation of resources, proliferating bureaucratic overhead, chronic mismatching of supply and demand, and both qualitative and quantitative collapse (Wheeler, 1990).

Conclusion

Education ... has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.

G. M. Trevelyan

Citizens in today's postcapitalist society need to be prepared to live in a global world. Education of this global citizen must begin with an introduction to their own society and their place in it, without that knowledge, it will be difficult to understand a multicultural perspective. Critical thinking ability is a key component of this informed global citizenry. Brookfield's notion of the importance of critical reflection and critical thinking as a part of a larger political process is more relevant today than ever, as is his idea that the teaching process can be used to either empower or oppress the learner. Empowered learners, and a return to the humanistic values of the past in the form of a classical education, coupled with vocational training for the future will insure American society of engaged and responsible citizens. Our founding fathers saw in education the key to national prosperity, both as an insurance policy against political tyranny, and as an investment for worldly success. After all, if another Constitutional Convention were convened next year, it's not at all clear that the current generation could bring to the chamber the same blend of practicality and learned wisdom- or want of cliché and jargon- that armed the delegates at Philadelphia in 1787 (Simmons, 1998).

It is a telling monument to our present society that in game shows such as “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire”, and “Weakest Link”, the low money questions are fraught with references to mass and popular culture, but the high end and million dollar questions are based on topics inherent to a classical education. The game’s inventors are not stupid, they know the odds of any contestant having the sufficient classical background to answer the question are very slim. A culture maintains its identity by passing on the sum of its values and experiences from one generation to the next. Ignorance is not merely a state of innocence. If deliberate, it becomes an act of complicity, enabling others to control our lives (Bertman, 2001). Along with their practical, vocational skills, workers in a global society will need to develop strong communication, leadership, and problem solving skills, hallmarks of a classical education ready and able to conquer any intellectual endeavor set before it. If the dynamics of power invade and distort educational processes as Brookfield says, then the ability to think critically about the issues of the day becomes an important skill for the education of all adults, and philosopher George Hole’s refinement of critical thinking to one question becomes more relevant to adult educators than ever.

What matters?

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