ALTERNATING CURRENTS: ONE TEACHER'S THINKING ABOUT THE CRITICAL THINKING MOVEMENT

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For many of my colleagues, teaching is a rather straightforward affair. In my case, it has never been so. After years of teaching, I am still asking, "What should I teach?" "How is this work of teaching to be done?"

I suspect that many of us who puzzle over teaching, as I do, are potential allies of colleagues who have taken up critical thinking as a focus of their teaching.

The scholarly discourse on "critical thinking" is flourishing: in Workshops, Conferences, Institutes, Councils, Foundations, an International Center, and hundreds of web-sites. There are courses on critical thinking across the curriculum and a widely read body of literature on "critical pedagogy" associated with the now deceased South American educator, Paulo Freire. Finally, there is an extensive collection of scholarly works on critical theory, albeit, directed most often at matters other than teaching and education.

As a teacher who has always advocated an understanding of the philosophy embedded in the way we teach, I assume there is something to be learned in ferment over critical thinking.

> Jim, you fret too much about teaching. You may think your philosophical concerns about the teaching enterprise are important—I've heard you explore these existential concerns often enough—but I don't see how they get translated into teaching. I think your philosophical questions, might better be called worries. You worry too much. Teach; forget philosophy. Existentialists don't make good teachers.

> And on this critical thinking business. I suspect it's a fashion. One day it's the humanistic perspective, the next feminism. You read critical race theory one week, semiotics the next. You move from one educational and scholarly fashion to another, none of

which, so far as I can see, have changed the fundamentals of
your teaching.

Some of us do, of course, get caught up in the scholarly fashions of our
times, but I think these fashions (if you must give them such a crude
label) serve a purpose. Without new scholarly currents to stir the settled
waters of conventional thinking (and conventional teaching), we would
simply become prisoners of today's conventions. We would, I'm afraid,
ignore to an even greater extent our teaching and our curriculums. You
scoff at scholarly fashions, but new scholarly concerns such as those
expressed in the critical thinking movement push us, generally, in the
right direction. Critical thinking invites us to rethink the intrinsic goods
we associate with learning.

> I've referred to critical thinking as a fashion. Let me explain
> what I mean. Learning is basically hard work, using habits
> developed over time, following individual practices that require
> experimentation, frustration, and failure. Can a focus on critical
> thinking (or for that matter any new program, pedagogical
> method, or theoretical view of teaching) alleviate the hard work
> it takes to learn? I'm doubtful.
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> The problem with the "critical thinking movement" (whatever
> we might decide this movement is) is that it reinvents the
> wheel. We need to teach students to learn how to think well.
> Wouldn't you agree? Do we really improve teaching and stu-
> dents' learning by deploying fanciful new terms like critical
> thinking?

I'm not sure there's any real disagreement about the basic goal: to teach
our students to think well. The proponents of critical thinking seek to
advance this goal as do "focus-on-the-basics" teachers. The real
difference is that the critical thinking oriented teacher tries to focus on
what it means to think well, to think in the most productive, careful,
disciplined, and reflective way possible. Careful articulation of the
attributes of critical thinking is important because these attributes of
critical thinking provide a kind of cognitive map that allows us to better
frame and refine our pedagogical goals.

And what are these attributes of critical thinking? In my survey of
the critical thinking literature, I found frequent references to the
following:

- discipline
- self-directed

- reflective
- imaginative
- analytical
- dialectical
- synthesizing
- reason-based
- evaluative (weighing of evidence, reasons, sources) (judgment)
- (discernment)
- purposeful (clarity about purposes)
- contextual/situation (domain driven)
- non-algorithmic, or reasoning toward a path of action is not
- fully specified in advance (reflecting an element of uncertainty)
- imposes meaning (finding structure in apparent disorder)
- apprehending the limits of one's own thinking
- meta-thinking, or, thinking about thinking

The critical thinking focused teacher says: We are more likely to accomplish even the most basic of tasks by careful attention to these attributes of critical thinking; we are more likely to engage our students in meaningful work, in learning that has long-term impact rather than energy absorbing pseudo-learning.

> Your list of attributes of critical thinking is exactly that—a list. The critical thinking proponents have simply created a catalogue of what we try to get our students to do across the curriculum. These attributes of critical thinking are what good teachers have always sought from their students. The problem with the "critical thinking movement" is that it substitutes "critical thinking" for "good teaching." Robert Grudin, in *The Grace of Great Things: Creativity and Innovation*, puts the point I want to make this way: "Since true teaching is not soon likely to be available on an institutional scale, we must seek it out in the writings and presence of isolated individuals."[1]

> What I'm resisting is the notion that critical thinking proponents have, in some way, found the pedagogical high ground from which we can all, finally, know what and how to teach.

> What does this talk about critical thinking, critical reading, critical writing really accomplish? Why not just focus on

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[1] Robert Grudin, THE GRACE OF GREAT THINGS: CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION 151 (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990).

thinking, reading, writing? I object to moving away from terms which we all already understand to the use of common terms with special meanings that must be defined by experts. We don't need more mystification. We know a great deal about quality and excellence in thinking, reading, and writing. There is a long history of conversation about the skills and performances (of students and teachers alike) in these activities. We have, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's terms, a rich "local knowledge" grounded in these enterprises.[2] Critical thinking proponents, based on my limited knowledge of their work, move away from "local knowledge" and toward a "theory" of thinking. I find the move toward theory misguided; it leads in the wrong direction.

I wouldn't say critical thinking is a theory about thinking. More accurately, the critical thinking movement pushes us to be clear about the ways in which thinking results in more productive use of the time we ask students to devote to higher levels of thinking.

Perhaps so. I don't have the working knowledge of the literature you do. My more basic point is that they've just used fashionable terms to talk about good teaching.

You mention Grudin, but he also talks about being attentive to the "inner necessities" of activities like learning, reading, and writing. Careful, analytical work on the attributes of good thinking is certainly the first step in understanding what how these "inner necessities" work.

The basic problem with so many "focus-on-the basics" teachers is that they assume they can simply ignore the perplexities we confront as teachers and learners. You consider teaching a straightforward, uncomplicated matter, but in doing so you try to ignore failures and accept as settled what we all know needs to be changed.

Critical thinking proponents say, look, by not addressing the perplexity, we simply fail to get the job done. Our students jump through our learning hoops but we know well enough that this can be done without much in the way of learning. The failure to recognize the ways we now fail in our teaching, leaves us accepting what should be changed.

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[2] Clifford Geertz, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE FURTHER ESSAYS IN INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

You didn't fully address my point about "local knowledge." I thought that idea might have more appeal to you.

Your appeal to the everyday sensibilities (and knowings) we associate with learning, writing, and reading has a surface attraction, but is still troubling. If we indeed know activities like thinking, reading, and writing well, *we know them too well*. Learning, reading, and writing are so fully shaped and burdened by old meanings, old habits (many of them quite bad), and with an accretion of false assurance, so much so that we really do need the new language of critical thinking (and other new rhetorics and languages) to help us see the poverty among the richness of "local knowledge."

> I'm not convinced, even with your urging, that a focus on critical thinking helps us locate and sort though the poverty and riches of "local knowledge." Teachers who focus on critical thinking are no doubt well motivated and deserve credit for good intentions, but there is no indication that a focus on critical thinking gets results.

What I hear in your skepticism about critical thinking is an old and familiar opposition to change. It's a resistance to the new, to theory, indeed, a resistance to the idea that theory matters, that theory might be the engine of change in education.

Your resistance to change is encoded in the proposition that proponents of change must prove their ideas work. This is an old conservative tactic.

When we foreclose new perspectives and ignore new movements like critical thinking, we privilege old ways of doing things and cut ourselves off from change. The critical thinking movement in education is simply another way to reconfigure the disciplinary landscape to keep complacent conservatives on alert.

> We do indeed need to know who the enemy is, and complacency will do for a start. But the enemies of education, of good education, are far more powerful than complacency.

> With your jab at the conservatives, you seem intent on injecting politics into the conversation.

I don't see how we can keep politics out of a discussion about critical thinking. Education, by its nature, is political. And certainly, critical thinking is political. When we take up critical thinking, learn the strategies of critical reading, and engage in critical writing, we become political actors. Critical thinking is a form of politics.

Or, put somewhat differently, critical thinking is a way of doing politics. It's an attempt to awaken the dormant political concerns of our students. We see the politics of critical thinking clearly in Paulo Freire's work on "critical pedagogy" and indeed, in critical theory itself. Critical thinking draws attention not so much to the politics of left and right, but to politics as hope in contrast to politics as complacency.

Ben Agger, in an essay published in the mid-1970s, in a book on critical theory, emphasizes the hopeful, expectant quality of critical theory. This is the way he puts it:

(i) "The rhetoric of critical theory emerges from the theorist's sense of the possibility of social change. . . ."

(ii) "[C]ritical theory . . . talks about the world as it assesses the social potential for freedom."

(iii) "One-dimensional society swallows up deviance but leaves the traces of idealism in theory, art, and music through which opposition can find its voice."

(iv) "[E]ach society needs critics and artists to idealize a higher order of freedom than that which has been actually attained."

(v) "Critical theory employs a vocabulary of hope and defeat."[3] It is the spirit of Ben Agger's 1970's essay that we saw manifested in the Critical Legal Studies movement in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

> Our differences on the significance of the critical perspective might be explored in the realm of politics, but that would take us rather far afield and move us away from the common ground we're trying to explore here. But we most definitely should talk about the scholarly apparatus called critical theory which you allude to in your remarks about the Agger essay.

> You can be commended for your judicious selection of quotes because the critical theorists I've attempted to read present their work in the most abstract, obtuse jargon imaginable. To compound their occluded thinking, they write only for a tight circle of fellow theorists who make careers of incestuously interpreting and citing each other's work. It's a closed, and I might add, rather bleak universe of scholarship and thinking.

> It's not clear to me how critical theorists are going to help us save the world.

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[3] Ben Agger, "On Happiness and the Damaged Life," in John O'Neill (ed.), ON CRITICAL THEORY 12-33 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

You have a point about critical theory. It's not easy going and not at all inviting to the theory shy. Maybe that's why the proponents of critical thinking in education pay critical theorists so little attention. Even those sympathetic to critical theory acknowledge the problem. For example, Thomas McLaughlin, in *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*,[4] makes reference to the "arcane references," "insider language," and "strategies of professional abuse and self-preservation" found in the writings of critical theorists.

> It doesn't take much in the way of reading critical theory to come to the conclusion that a law teacher isn't going to find critical theory the answer to her concerns about teaching.

> We need to simply think more carefully about our basic mission in legal education which is to provide the educational framework in which our students learn to "think like lawyers."

There is plenty that goes badly in legal education, and I'm confident that we do as much harm in teaching our students to "think like lawyers" as in anything else we do. The real problem is that when we teach them to "think like lawyers" we are asking them not to think as whole persons, or as members of communities, or as neighbors. The more critical thinking and reflection we engage in the more problematic this idea of "thinking like a lawyer."

> Whatever need a lawyer may have of critical thinking—and it is sometimes considerable—it is secondary to the more basic need to think in discipline defined ways.

> I don't share your view that teaching students to "think like lawyers" is the problem. We should take pride and not be at all philosophically defensive about this goal. If "thinking like a lawyer" is what we teach, then critical thinking is a second order, lower-level concern, and must always be so.

> Our first goal is to teach the discipline, teach the way law would have us think. To use Geertz again, "thinking like a lawyer" *is* our "local knowledge." Without this "local knowledge" we lawyers would be lost, our value to clients questionable. Discipline knowledge must always trump theoretical knowledge; critical thinking is a form of theoretical knowledge.

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[4] Thomas McLaughlin, STREET SMARTS AND CRITICAL THEORY 5 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

> I know this raises a rather tattered old praxis/theory dichotomy, and I really don't have in mind taking us down that well-worn path.

Of course, we must teach the discipline and certainly cannot ignore "local knowledge." But all this talk about "local knowledge" begins to sound all too celebratory to me.

I'm stealing the word celebratory from Howard Lesnick, a law colleague who talks about the contrast between celebratory and troubled stances in regards to professionalism.[5] I suspect, using Lesnick's terms, you're a celebrant. Those of us who've turn to the critical thinking movement are more likely to have a troubled view of the discipline and the law school curriculum that shapes it. We are troubled by the crude versions of legal education in which "thinking like a lawyer" takes on an unruly life of its own. What we need is a critical, historical, sociological perspective on the disciplines you would have us celebrate.

As a first step in the direction of charting such a perspective, I would begin by outlining two scenarios, one in which discipline insiders celebrate their good fortunes, the second in which the troubled are recognized and honored as doing discipline worthy work.

Scenario #1: A discipline arrives on the scene with great promise. It sets itself up as a powerful lens through which some crucial part of human experience can be understood and systematically studied. Each of the social sciences—sociology, anthropology, psychology—begin in just such a fashion. It is the power, language, and methodology of a discipline that captures our imagination and calls for the devotion of a life's work. When we celebrate a discipline we honor the work we have chosen and the "local knowledge" it allows us to understand. Indeed, the social science disciplines, and professions like law, have become so embedded in society that they too become forms of "local knowledge." With the success of a discipline, and the life it makes possible, we become ever more oblivious to the disciplines' limits, failures, and pathologies.

Scenario #2: In this view of discipline life, a discipline is not just a powerful lens we use to study some limited aspect of human behavior, but a haven for those who seek social legitimation for their cultural diagnostic work.

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[5] Howard Lesnick, BEING A LAWYER: INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PRACTICE OF LAW (1992).

Disciplines, if we follow the sociologist C. Wright Mills, honor the impulse not only to know but to complain. They allow us to register our complains in the language of a trained community of observers. It was something of this sort Mills called "sociological imagination"—an imagination that makes it possible to translate personal "troubles" into public "issues."[6]

In this second scenario, a discipline not only organizes and provides access to knowledge by systematically indexing facts, data, and information, it provides a safe haven for those bearing the world bad news. In this second view of discipline life, the most honored and highly desirable of discipline skills, is found in just such acts of cultural diagnosis. Our progress will be faltering, and our hope an illusion, unless we have and support the critics who can diagnose culture (in much the same fashion as we now routinely diagnosis and address our bodily ailments).

Basically, we devotees of disciplines must honor, in some fashion or other, one or the other of these two scenarios. We either celebrate our shared consensus and limited view of the world (with the conformity and confinement it invites), or we accept our disciplines as tribal longhouses inhabited by critics who use disciplines as portals or openings by which the future is plotted and we attempt to find new strategies to translate complaints into perceptions of public problems.

> Since you've taken the occasion to lay out this rather dramatic conflict based view of the disciplines, perhaps you will allow me to expand on my idea about "local knowledge."

> It may, in the end, be a simple matter of faith (or, less theologically, direction and orientation). Those who are philosophically and critically inclined, will, like you, continue to experience existential angst as teachers. They will continue to seek their salvation in the latest scholarly movements and in the phantasy that theory is an antidote to anxiety.

> But I can assure you, in the world I inhabit, critical theorists, with their uninviting language, ungrounded philosophical orientation, and inability to tell a good story, do not point in the direction I want to go.

> I'm arguing for a different orientation, for teaching that works bottom up. In my view of teaching, we start with the student

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[6] C. Wright Mills, THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION 1-24 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

rather than a theory about learning, or as with critical thinking proponents, a list of attributes embedded in higher levels of thinking. I start with "local knowledge" rather than theory, with the way students already talk about their lives, with the metaphors and images students already use to shape their world. We need to start work (and teaching) with what is in place, close to home, focusing on real problems.

I can't concern myself with new scholarly movements (and the horrific abstractions of critical theory) until I have adequately explored and tried to understand the actual critical impulses students might actually experience (or fail to experience). What I'm arguing is that we are all, already, in a sense, critics. We may not be good critics; many don't seek to be. Most students will never come close to the kind of complex critical thinking you envision.

If you want to put a mystifying label on my perspective— theorists are fond of labels—then call my folk view of teaching, an 'archaeology of criticism'. In my vision of teaching, we turn to theory only when "local knowledge" runs out, or leaves us at an impasse, not knowing what most needs to be known. We certainly don't start with theory; we start with ourselves, with the lives we are already living, with the theories manifest (embedded in) the lives we live and the stories we make of those lives.

In this folk, bottom-up perspective, we pay particular attention to what your friend Thomas McLaughlin calls "street smarts"; we listen to the "vernacular" and chart our course from there.

Our teaching should be directed to the critical impulses we experience in everyday life rather than the arcane mysteries of critical theory.

I can see that you've actually read more critical theory than you've tried to lead me to believe. It's obvious that you too are under the influence of theorists—but then how could it be otherwise.

Your phenomenological perspective is interesting and your concern for bottom-up teaching notable. But let me see if its not possible to turn your phenomenology into a critique.

I assume you would agree that the "vernacular" and the "everyday" which you see as a source of valuable "local knowledge" are also the very problem we're trying to address. Ordinary life and everyday reality provide an endless stream of needs, doings, thoughts, feelings, memo-

ries, and projects. The problem is that we let all this everyday reality and "local knowledge" overly dominate our lives.

The everyday and ordinary life of getting-by, getting-on-with-it, doing-as-others-do, provides, or so it might appear, a perfectly good meaning scheme, but a meaning scheme that keeps us quiet as critics. Wendell Berry, a writer with an affinity for your folk perspective, and who has studiously and steadfastly refrained from indulgence in the jargons of critical theory (even though he is very much a social critic) makes the point this way: "It is possible to speak a language so commonized by generality or jargon or slang that one's own mind and life virtually disappear into it."[7]

Philosophers, none more persuasively than Socrates, have found occasion to admonish of the dangers of an unexamined life. Even conservative scholars like Michael Novak, in his previous reincarnation as a progressive scholar, noted in his 1970s masterpiece, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove,*[8] that "[t]here are people whose metaphysics are, in effect, the comfortable feeling they have just after a heavy lunch; they see no need to raise ontological questions. They live and they die; and they think persons who torment themselves about ultimate questions both waste their time and overlook the pleasantness of the present."

If the philosophical project (and its various strategies) to awaken us to what Novak calls "ultimate questions" had been more successful, we would not have need for critical theory. (What else can philosophy be but a history of critical thinking?) But philosophy having failed us—or we having failed philosophy—we must continue to reinvent the philosophical project, the critical project, in which the arguments and strategies we present as teachers are made the constant subject of revision and critique.

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[7] Wendell Berry, STANDING BY WORDS 207 (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983).

[8] Michael Novak, ASCENT OF THE MOUNTAIN, FLIGHT OF THE DOVE: AN INVITATION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES 47 (New York: Harper & Row, rev. ed., 1978) (1971).