Development Education and Critical Thinking

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WHAT DOES CRITICAL THINKING MEAN?
This chapter explores two different meanings of the term ‘critical thinking’. It will be useful to begin with the following exercise. Answer question one before looking at question two or three.

Quotation A:
...in many cases the policies promoted in the name of globalisation have not addressed human development problems...The end result is a process of globalisation that is redistributing wealth and opportunity in the wrong direction, from the poor to the rich. This is morally indefensible, economically inefficient, and socially unsustainable.

Quotation B:
Globalisation generally reduces poverty because more integrated economies tend to grow faster and this growth is usually more widely diffused. As low-income countries break into the global market for manufactures and services, poor people can move from the vulnerability of grinding rural poverty to better jobs, often in towns and cities.

1. These two quotations present very different views of the relationship between globalisation and poverty. Which of them do you think a critical thinking person would accept as true? Why?

2. The first quotation comes from Oxfam. The second comes from the World Bank. In light of this new information, which of them do you think a critical thinking person would accept as true? Did the extra information change your mind or make you more secure in your opinion? If so, why?

3. Think back over your answers to the previous questions. What do they tell you about your own view of what constitutes critical thinking?
What does ‘critical thinking’ mean? When we engage in development education, is it to discover the ‘truth’ about development and underdevelopment? How should development education thinking and learning relate to taking action? How do the answers to these questions affect the ways in which we teach/learn when we engage in development education? These are some of the issues that this paper seeks to address.

Critical thinking and acting are two elements that are commonly cited as components of development education. In this chapter, I explore the way in which these two components of development education fit together, through an exploration of how the Brazilian writer Paulo Freire – one of the key influences on the development of development education (Osler, 1994; Regan and Robinson, 1996) – grappled with these issues from the 1960s to the 1990s. I would suggest that, although they arrive at similar destinations, the French writer Michel Foucault offers a more coherent account of how to make sense of the problems which lie at the core of development education than Freire’s own work does.

For many writers, critical education, such as development education, is seen to be necessary because many people are unaware of the ‘truth’ in relation to aspects of their lives, including development and underdevelopment. Through a critical education process, it is believed that learners will develop a critical consciousness – an awareness of the truth – that will, in turn, spur them to act for development. Development education is, in this understanding, a process of uncovering the truth for previously misled or partially-informed people, and spurring them to act on the basis of that truth. It is believed that when development education’s learners find out the truth about the evils of the current terms of trade, the World Bank, globalisation or GMOs, they will act against these forces of underdevelopment and, in doing so, act for development.

Some writers (commonly called postmodern writers) would suggest a need to re-evaluate the relationship between ‘critical thinking’, ‘truth’ and ‘action’. The French philosopher/historian Michel Foucault argued that critical thinking is never about discovering ‘truth’. It is, instead, about exploring the different ways in which people claim to have identified the ‘truth’. For him, critical thinking means looking at the different claims that exist, exploring the basis on which each claim is made, and ensuring that a variety of different claims are heard. Our job is not to teach the truth but to engage in a process of unpacking the bases for a range of different truth claims and to ensure that a range of truth claims is heard. Yet, modernist writers contend, in a world without truth, what basis can there be for action? If we cannot say definitively that the
problem is a specific way of dealing with trade, debt, globalisation or GMOs, what basis do we have for acting to change these things? If we can never know for sure, why not just sit at home or go shopping? Without a ‘truth’ basis for acting for development, is there any such thing as development education?

CRITICAL THINKING AND ACTING IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

There is no shortage of formal definitions and discussions as to what development education is about: examples include the definition offered by the Joint United Nations Information Committee (1975 quoted in Sterling, Bobbett and Norris 1995, p. 32), as well as ones used by the National Committee for Development Education (1996, p. 11) and the Development Education Commission (1999, p. 13). Despite their different emphases, these definitions share a number of characteristics. All identify an ‘action’ component to development education (they use phrases such as “participate in the development of their community”; “effective and long-term responses”; “‘writing’ the world and the dynamics of change”) and most contain the term “critical”, either as part of the term “critical thinking” or in “critical consciousness/critical awareness”. While it is possible to find definitions of development education (such as the National Committee for Development Education’s definition) that do not explicitly use the word “critical”, nonetheless, references to “analysis” and “reflection” act as synonyms.

Osler (1994, p. 2) identifies that the linking of the development of ideas to an action orientation in development education definitions betrays something of the roots of development education thinking in the work of educators of the Third World such as Paulo Freire. Freire argued that radical education was about producing a critical consciousness, through a process of engaged, problem-based, democratic education. Such an approach to education would enable people to move beyond accepting what they are told is true and to see the real truth. It would enable people to see through the myths, veils and lies of ideology to the truth of their situation in the world. This, in turn, would give people a basis for acting to change their world. For Freire, these three things fitted together: critical thinking gives rise to seeing the truth, which encourages people to act. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, for example, he cites a former factory worker who says, “When I began this course I was naïve, and when I found out how naïve I was, I started to get critical” (emphasis in original, 1970, p. 15). An almost identical phrase appears almost thirty years later in Pedagogy of Hope (1999, p. 45).
This conceptualisation of the term ‘critical’ has a long history in Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship. When faced with the question as to why the poor were not rising up and overthrowing their oppressors, Marx identified that they were the victims of ideology; that their exploitation had been veiled by illusions cast by those in power (for Marx this meant those who owned and controlled companies and their allies in governments and in the churches) (1967, p. 82). Overcoming ideology meant engaging in a “relentless criticism of all existing conditions” (emphasis added, Marx, quoted in Carr and Kemmis 1986, p. 138) that would enable people to overcome the veil of ideology and see clearly the reality of their situation. This meaning of the term ‘critical’ is central to a European philosophical tradition called critical theory, and is found in the work of writers like Jurgen Habermas:

> Critical theory is not ‘critical’ in the sense of voicing disapproval of contemporary social arrangements, but in the sense that it attempts to distil the historical processes which have caused subjective meanings to become systematically distorted… [It] is particularly focused on the ways of thinking which support such subjugation…[such as] in the dominance of a way of thinking which makes such oppression seem unproblematic, inevitable, incidental or even justified (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p. 138)

In this respect, Freire seems broadly in agreement with Marx and with critical theorists like Habermas, both of whom would be described as being ‘modernist’ thinkers. For him, arriving at a critical consciousness means seeing things that one has not previously seen, “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (1970, p. 15). For Freire and his followers, critical education such as development education, is part of a process of anti-ideological action in which anti-oppressive forces sought to challenge the justifications for oppression and the learned-lethargy that allows oppression to continue. Although his broad conceptualisation later seemed to change, Freire continued to defend this basic position right up to the 1990s. In Pedagogy of Hope, for example, he continues to identify that the function of critical education is to uncover the ‘truth’, and indeed, uses the same image that Marx uses in The Communist Manifesto – that of ideology as a veil which hides the truth: he writes, “…the educational practice of a progressive option will never be anything but an adventure in unveiling. It will always be an experiment in bringing out the truth” (1999, p. 7).

**CRITIQUING ‘CRITICAL THEORY’: TAKING A POSTMODERN TURN**

Although Freire’s imagery, language and conceptualisation of ideology locate him alongside modernist thinkers like Marx or Habermas, Freire actually described himself as a postmodern
thinker: “Let us be postmodern: radical and utopian”, he writes (1999, p. 10). The term ‘postmodern’ is perhaps a difficult one to make sense of. While some tend to see all postmodernists as sharing a basic idea, this is really not an accurate description. Postmodern writers like Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986), for example, work very hard to distance themselves from other postmodern writers (such as Derrida) whom they call ‘anti-thinkers’. Kumar argues that it is only the rejection of the key concerns of modernity – a belief in the inevitability of progress, a belief in science and a humanistic or romantic conception of the individual - that unites what is otherwise a “hopelessly diffuse and dispersed series of propositions” (1997, p. 104). It would be as wrong, therefore, to think that all postmodernists hold the same views, as it would be to think that all modernists hold the same views.

For Freire, the difficulty with modernist writers lies in their rigid conception of truth and falsity, which he sees as being arrogant (1999, p. 79) and which he describes as being sectarian (1999, p. 50). In this, he draws on the postmodern critique of the modernist conception of truth. In the modernist worldview, there is a truth that can be known. Consequently, someone can be right and those who disagree with this person are wrong. Marxists, critical theorists and development educators who believe they know the truth about oppression, trade, debt, or GMOs imply that the those who do not share their views actually do not properly understand what is going on and are victims of ideology. They believe that by engaging people in a process of critical education, people will come to see the same truth as they. But what if, having engaged in a process of critical thinking, the learner arrives at a different conclusion about oppression, trade, debt, or GMOs to the teacher? From a modernist perspective, this outcome is not possible. For modernist critical educators, ‘critical’ thinking is defined in terms of the coherence between its outcomes and its processes. In this context, a failure to agree with the educator at the end of the process constitutes a failure to properly engage in the process: a failure to be critical. ‘Since I am critical, and I am right, if you disagree with me it is because you are not critical’, the modernist says. Despite all of the discussion of democratic educational practices, because of the modernist’s faith in their own knowledge of the truth there is effectively no basis for the learner to come to a different conclusion than the teacher.

This is one of the forms of what Benton calls the paradox of emancipation (1981, p. 162) – one can be freed from the ideas of dominant groups only by accepting the ideas of other groups. While the World Bank, the IMF and various other bodies tell us they want to make our lives better, and while anti-ideological campaigners say they want to make us free, is it not also fair to
suggest that what they all really want is for us to accept their view of our lives instead of our own? For postmodern writers, the decision to believe one group rather than another is based more on faith than on logic:

Are conditions of religious conviction or liberal political participation or communist party membership guaranteed to lift scales from eyes and reveal interests as they are? Only if one happens to believe in the authenticity of the post-conversion state, be it due to the correct reading of the new testament, John Stuart Mill or Karl Marx (Clegg 1989, p. 97).

For Freire, the guardians of the one true truth, whether they are from the right or the left, share a common authoritarian attitude:

Manipulation and authoritarianism are practiced by many educators who, as they style themselves progressives, are actually taken for such … To criticise the arrogance, the authoritarianism of intellectuals of Left or Right, who are both basically reactionary in an identical way – who judge themselves the proprietors of knowledge, the former, of revolutionary knowledge, the latter, of conservative knowledge … – this I have always done (1999, p. 79).

At the same time, as we have seen, Freire, apparently contradictorily, continues to use the language of ‘truth’ to describe his own position. Freire seeks to inoculate himself against arrogance in at least two ways. First, he identifies that a mutual attitude of tolerance for other people’s ‘truths’ must rise above the differences in positions adopted (1999, p. 13). Second, the ‘truth’ of the educator is of secondary importance when compared to the development of creative capacity and the investigative and judgemental skills of the learner (1999, p. 79). For Freire, the truly important content is in the skills and attitudinal focus of the learning, rather than in the knowledge base.

Freire shares his discomfort with the idea of ‘one true truth’ with Michel Foucault. For Foucault, each ‘truth’ has, hidden beneath it, a range of assumptions and ways of thinking that have given rise to it. None can ever be the indisputable truth. Consequently, he argues that the concept of ideology is not a useful one, precisely because it implies someone is right and someone is wrong (1980, p. 118). While critical theorists see truth as something that frees us from the ideological effects of power, for Foucault all claims to truth, no matter who makes them, are an articulation of power:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth is not outside power, or lacking in power…[Truth] isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world. (1980, p. 131).
The tying of power and truth together like this should be read in two ways. The right to name something as true, and the mechanisms through which something is deemed to be true, and the context within which that happens, are the subject of dispute and negotiation in which each participant tries to use whatever power they can to influence the outcome. Put differently, to identify who has power, look for people or groups who are believed to know the truth and the context in which they are believed. Those people or groups are using power in the context within which they are believed. If the IMF is believed to know the truth at inter-governmental conferences, then they are articulating power in that context. Those who are believed to have a good analysis within the Socialist Workers Party or the Latin America Solidarity Group are using power in that context. Those who are believed in broader public discourse are using power in that context. Of course, in the next argument or discussion, someone else may come to be believed. For this reason, Foucault is not terribly interested in who is using power at any one time. He is more interested in how they came to articulate power, that is, the rules of the game or the taken for granted assumptions about the nature of ‘proof’ in a given context (and the different assumptions about proof that apply in different contexts) that enables someone to articulate power.

Secondly, by naming something as ‘true’ it is given a power over people. Because medical knowledge is ‘true’, doctors have the right to confine us in hospitals and sanitoria, because what the World Bank says is true, trade is liberalised and because what Oxfam says is true people donate money and buy fair trade coffee, and so on. Because of its power, truth has the capacity to be dangerous for those who live under it. Foucault looks at ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in the same way as he looks at ‘true’ and ‘false’ – as representing positions rather than universal values. When faced with an apparently self-evidently good thing like ‘justice’, Foucault identifies how this term has been used to imprison and punish people (Foucault 1997; Rabinow 1991, p. 6). Because all power and, therefore, all claims to truth have the capacity to affect people, all such claims need to be questioned and challenged.

For Foucault, the problem is not to distinguish between truth and falsity but, instead to explore different ways in which truth claims (and ‘good’ claims) come to be accepted and to examine the effects of different claims to truth (Rabinow, 1991, p. 4). For Foucault, there is no problem with making claims to ‘truth’ but they must be understood as taking a position, not a lifting of the veil:

The essential political problem…is not to criticise the ideological contents [of people’s thought], but that of ascertaining the possibilities of a new politics of truth. It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be chimera since
truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (Foucault, 1980, p.133).

Clearly, this means examining the basis of the claims of dominant groups like the World Bank or the IMF. However it also means examining the claims of other groups, (the ‘good guys’) such as Oxfam, Greenpeace or anti-globalisation activists. For Foucault, “critical rationality consists in the unflinching examination of our most cherished and comforting assumptions” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p. 110). Having used our scalpel to dissect the views that we comfortably identify as ideological, we need to turn the scalpel on ourselves: “The practitioner of interpretative analytics realises that he himself is produced by what he is studying [i.e. Power]; consequently he can never get outside it” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p. 115). For Foucault, our position is just that: a position. Like all other positions, ours must be open to examination, analysis and critique.

Although they share a common critique of modernist notions of truth, Foucault goes further than Freire. Foucault identifies a problem not only with the term ‘truth’ but also with the term ‘good’. There is little in Freire to suggest that he would be comfortable about following his own logic to this extent. Indeed, while he identifies his ‘truth’ as a position, Freire continues to use the language of ‘truth’ rather than the language of ‘positions’, and shows little inclination to turn the scalpel of analysis on his own basic position over a twenty-five year period. While Foucault insists that self-reflective analysis and critique are necessary and that what is needed is an analysis of the basis on which positions are taken, Freire seems content to fight for his own position, within the context of tolerating the positions of others. In all these ways, Freire seems less consistent in his own analysis than Foucault.

Yet the similarities are also clear. Like Foucault, Freire seeks to be free from the demands of being correct. Like Foucault, he seeks to be able to listen to other people and positions more openly precisely because we recognise our own position as being just that: a position. By letting go of their own claims to eternal truth both seek to remain open to debate, discuss and explore the positions of others.

WHAT BASIS FOR ACTION IN A WORLD WITHOUT TRUTH?
The postmodern rejection of truth has not gone uncontested by modernist thinkers. Jurgen Habermas, asks of Foucault “…why fight at all?” (1994, p. 96). If we do not believe
wholeheartedly in the rightness of our cause (including the factual correctness of its arguments) do we not become relativists who are willing to live with anything no matter what its effects upon people are simply because all things are justifiable from some position. Postmodernism, writes Agnes Heller:

…has a simple enough message: anything goes. This is not a slogan of rebellion, nor is postmodernism in fact rebellious… ‘Anything goes’ can be read as follows: you may rebel against anything you want to rebel against but let me rebel against the particular thing I want to rebel against. Or, alternatively speaking, let me not rebel against anything because I feel completely at ease (quoted in Bewes, 1997, p. 25-26).

Seen in this way, postmodernism is a decadent, self-indulgent nihilism that leads to an embrace of consumer culture in the cause of dressing up irony as struggle. And yet, both Freire and Foucault found time to get away from their shopping and engage in political action. Freire’s work in Brazil is well known, while Foucault was one of the founders of the Information Group on Prisons, which was set up to “create conditions that permit prisoners themselves to speak” (Foucault quoted in Smart 1985, p. 17). How does one explain such political action if their position should condemn them to a cynical individualism?

Freire seems not to offer much by way of an answer to this question. He does what he does because it is his position. While he insists on the need to tolerate alternative positions, he does not adequately identify the relevance of that tolerance for his own position – he does not turn the scalpel back upon himself – and therefore can comfortably engage in or move people to action without seeing clearly the problem that would undermine the action. Foucault, by being more rigorous in his analysis, makes the problematic nature of his own activism clearer.

For Habermas, Foucault’s decision to be an activist was an example of his own contradictions (1986, p. 108). Foucault sees things differently. For him, one does not need an eternal truth or good to want to play a role in changing the world.

Foucault insists that saying there is no social existence without power relations does not entail that particular, oppressive power relations are necessary. The field of possibilities that give rise to such current injustices…also contained …alternatives that were not acted upon. (Hoy 1986, p. 144-145)

Every social formation has the potential to be oppressive, including, incidentally, those that are not currently oppressive:

My point is not that everything is bad but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism (Foucault 1997, p. 256).
What form was this hyper-activism to take? Foucault suggests that one form of appropriate action was to create a space in which the voice of the subject of power relations was to be heard. His aim was to support ‘local criticism’ of the experience of power in particular instances (Smart 1986, p. 167). Indeed, one can interpret Foucault’s writings as a political act: an engaged and self-critical exploration of the uses and construction of notions of sickness/wellness, justice, and the self in society.

What this self-critical hyper- and pessimistic activism means in practice can be seen in relation to Foucault’s use of the language of Human Rights. Foucault does state formally his practical support for the concept of ‘human rights’ in relation to his political work (1980, p. 108). However, even if we accept the concept of rights, we are expected to think about them. We need to concretely support human rights while questioning their foundations: “we need to remain sceptical at one and the same time precisely of those rights that we support (and perhaps campaign for), if only to avoid the kind of self-subjugation…which stifles critical judgement” (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994, p. 191). As such, the concept of rights, which is supported in concrete ways, must at the same time be viewed “in terms of methods of subjugation that it instigates” (Foucault, cited in Keenan, 1987, p. 24). Since the use of the conception of rights as a tool of resistance is always itself an articulation of power, Foucault remains uncomfortable with terms like ‘rights’ (as he is with comparable terms like ‘justice’), while at the same time being willing to use them. He is willing to work against what he sees as oppressive, but not to suggest that he knows the ultimate alternative since any conception of utopia is likely to give rise to its own problems. Therefore, he does not promote an alternative utopia, nor does he want everyone to do things his way. Instead, he want to question what it is that he, and others, do:

…the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that we can fight them (Foucault, quoted in Rabinow, 1991, p. 6).

This applies as much to ‘neutral and independent’ institutions that are commonly thought of as the good guys as it does to institutions that are commonly portrayed as soulless or uncaring.

CONCLUSION

Both “critical thinking” and “acting” or “transforming the world” are central to how development education defines itself. Yet the relationship between these two components is made problematic by the various understandings of what “critical thinking” means. While Freire’s writings in the
late 1960s and early 1970s seem to suggest that critical thinking means unveiling the lies, the half-truths and the naïveté that veils the truth and, by seeing the truth, being motivated to change the world, his later work re-interprets this position less dogmatically. He later identifies that he was always opposed to the manipulation of learners by educators who are thought of as progressive (1999, p. 79).

Although there is much of value in Freire’s work, he stops short of applying his ideas consistently in relation to his own thinking. For such a consistent application of these ideas, I have turned to Foucault, who sees ‘criticism’ as constituting an exploration of the standards of proof and the mechanisms of truth that apply in different contexts. Such an analysis is not simply critical of the things we do not like, but must, in turn, be critical of the very ideas we hold most dear. For writers like Habermas the approach of both Freire and Foucault leads logically to an inability to act to change the world, since all competing truths are open to being accepted and there is no consequent reason for action. Yet for both, action in the world was a key part of their lives. For Foucault, saying that everything is potentially dangerous does not mean everything is bad. Consequently he argues for action that is constantly self-critical. This, I suggest, is a far more coherent basis for building tolerance and democratic debate than either the traditional modernist conception of critical education, or Freire’s more limited analysis.

REFERENCES


