Criticality: Its reflective utility within a Technical and Further Education workplace context

Mark A. Tyler, Faculty of Education, Toowoomba Campus, University of Southern Queensland, Australia, tylerm@usq.edu.au

Abstract

This paper traces reflective practices through the lens of criticality as a commonality of mindset and action in relation to a teacher's experience within a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute in Brisbane, Australia. This experience spans a period of 13 years, in which the efficacy of this teacher's praxis was put to the test and personally questioned. The paper highlights the recurrence of the theme "critical" within this teacher's professional career, along with personally significant ideological beliefs and values. The significance of this journey is that it highlights for others how one's philosophy of action can keep one afloat in what some would suggest is an oppressive work environment. It also articulates the utility of criticality in one teacher's struggle within a vocational education and training workplace.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to provide a personal discourse on arriving at a useful methodology for dealing with teacher/management tensions within a vocational education and training (VET) workplace. The paper details my journey towards an appropriate conceptual framework which not only guides my practice but also may be suitable for conducting PhD research. The term "appropriate" is used in a very personal way that announces personal congruence with "walking the talk", to coin a colloquialism. The objective of this journey is to arrive at a position in which I can articulate what is central to my motivation for action – my philosophy of method.

The term "criticality" I have borrowed from Barnett (1997), who suggests that criticality translocates itself within the domains of reason, self and the world. He also contends that criticality operates at a number of levels, ranging from instrumental levels to higher transformative levels of conceptualisation. I wish to explore where and how criticality has crisscrossed my professional and personal experience and how it relates to my reasons for action in my world.

Criticality is also considered a central term embedded within critical theory. Brookfield (2005) in his exploration of critical theory for adult learning highlights the four traditions of criticality. These are criticality as:

1. A means to disengage from accepted and unjust ideologies and to exert more conscious control;

2. The ability to become consciously aware of how and why we constrain ourselves – an emancipatory and transformative process involving reflection and reflexivity;

3. Skilful argument and critical thinking; and

4. A pragmatist and constructivist tradition that emphasises the construction and deconstruction of people's learning, and the pragmatic experimentation with the aim of continual improvement.

As mentioned, I trace the construct of criticality as I use it to help make personal sense of my actions within my world. My understanding of this construct borrows explicitly from the above traditions highlighted by Brookfield (2005). Throughout what follows will be examples of how I have challenged accepted ideologies and attempted to take greater control of my actions and thoughts, through thinking deeply on matters of importance in an attempt to improve the manner in which I engaged in my world of work.

I start by saying that "a conformist I am not". Perhaps this is an impossible state to attain given the social nature of my involvement in the world but the phrase does attune with the *contraire* in me. It is a position which gives me licence to be different, to knock, to have a go at, to put down, to laugh at mistakes, not to be perfect in others' eyes. In a sense it is a position which allows mistakes by virtue of the fact that to conform is to fit in, to live up to expectations, to be successful, to do what one is told. In reality I do conform. I think I just don't like being told how to conform. It is when limits are applied and debate is quashed, when narrowmindedness festers and when thinking is passive as opposed to critical, that I feel dissonance.

It was in the latter of these positions that I found myself after an initial settling-in period as a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teacher at a regional campus of a large TAFE institute in Brisbane, Australia. Fresh from "industry" as a human service worker (both as practitioner and as manager) and newly graduated with a Graduate Diploma of Adult and Vocational Education and Training, I was keen to make an impact upon the quality of human service education within the VET sector. However, before I move into this context, I explore the ideas, beliefs and practices in my previous professional experience as they affected what was my new professional position – teaching.

Pre-TAFE experience

Not a stranger to training, I had previous experience in a staff training role delivering a direct care curriculum for Queensland's health authority. Prior to my completing the above mentioned graduate diploma, my formal training in teaching principles consisted of a part-time eight-week TAFE course in instructional skills. It was during my years as a human service work practitioner that I began to question my practice and ask myself, "Why do I do and see things in this or that particular way?" This period in the human service industry was punctuated by my participation in full- and part-time tertiary education around paradigms that are said to inform the human services industry's practices – namely, psychology, sociology and social work. It was at the meeting of my practice with this theory that I began to reflect upon what made me engage in the way that I did. Central to this impact was the normalisation principle (Nirje, 1969; Wolfensberger, 1972).

My human service work at that stage consisted of engaging with people who had intellectual disabilities. The normalisation principle meant that these people should have access to the conditions of everyday life as do the non-disabled in our society; this included taking on valued roles that enhanced individual competence within our society (see Wolfensberger's [1972] work on social role valorisation). Central to this principle was self-determination, an embodiment of a person's right to be the central causal agent in her or his life in both choices and decisions. Hughes and Agran (1998) describe self-determination as "people speaking up for themselves and making and acting on their own lifestyle choices…" (p. 1).

My praxis was informed to the point that, in order for me to be authentic, I needed firstly to be aware of the degree to which specific clients had a reduced capacity to act in a self-determined manner and secondly to ensure that my engagements were such that the capacity that they did have was utilised. As this was the period of de-institutionalisation in Australia, I had plenty to be critical about using the above lens. For example, in my experience whilst working in a large institution on the outskirts of Brisbane, it was the people with the greater capacities who were always de-institutionalised first – a decision, it appears, which related to the amount of money that it took to care for people making the transition from institution to community.

Still within the human service industry I moved through several positions, coming into contact with a diversity of client groups – for example, youth, families and non-government organisations. Throughout this phase of my career I had regularly reflected on decisions that I made in my day-to-day practice, especially in relation to my impact on client self-determination. Dealing with these clients, who arguably had a greater capacity to act in self-determined ways, further challenged my praxis. Practising using a framework of self-advocacy became a priority.

Self-advocacy as a concept and skill relates closely to self-determination (Field, 1996). The roots of self-advocacy, as a guide for intervention within the human services, can be found in the civil rights movement and in the disability field (Williams & Shoultz, 1982). More recently, the broadening of its application has been noted. Stoodden (2000, as cited in Izzo & Lamb, 2002) sees it as an ability to voice one's needs and to make informed decisions about who and what supports these needs. It is this broader application and conceptualisation of self-advocacy that I took with me into other areas of my work.

In a recent paper, Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer and Eddy (2005) articulated a conceptual framework for self-advocacy which resonates with both my past and my present practice. They highlight four major components of self-advocacy: knowledge of self; knowledge of rights; communication (skills); and leadership (skills). When I peruse the sub-components of these – for example, strengths, goals, consumer and educational rights, assertiveness, listening and team work (p. 49), I see that my work entailed engaging with people to strengthen these various capacities. But it is the component "knowledge of rights" that hits the sweet spot of my criticality.

Knowledge of rights and reasons to my mind is an important tool for leverage when change is important, especially in instances of disadvantage. I believe that it allows a move from mere opinion to reasoned knowledge. It is this shift which could well be aligned with Freire's (1970, p. 304) concept of conscientisation, a means of developing a critical consciousness. This is where I believe that individuals engage in the in-depth examination of issues through the use of practised dialogue, as opposed to polemics.

In the move from the profession of human services to teaching, it was a matter of course that I gravitated toward those paradigms that were syntonic. Through the conduit of a graduate diploma I was introduced to both Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Habermas's (1972, 1973) views about taking a critical theory perspective. These two perspectives aligned well with my past experiences and practices in the human services field. It is through these and other lenses that I now begin to explore the various nuances of my experience at TAFE.

The TAFE experience

When I entered TAFE in 1991, curriculum for the humanist applied sciences there appeared to follow a model which was blended from the cognitive developmental model (Brady, 1990) and an interactive model (Skilbeck, 1976). This consisted of curriculum chosen by the teacher and designed for adults to construct their own knowledge, with an emphasis on the learning which results from the students' interactions with other students and with the expert (in this case a teacher with relevant industry experience) whilst undertaking the practicum. To my mind, it was a model which allowed for dealing with the dynamics of the human service industry (social welfare, social work, community development and the like), but which provided a degree of structure in accordance with adult learning principles (Knowles, 1990).

This model, which allowed some degrees of knowledge construction by the student, was replaced by competency-based training (CBT). Agreeable definitions of CBT are hard to find. Smith and Keating (2003) offer some clarification in their identification of the key elements within available definitions:
- The focus of training is on the outcome of the training.
- The outcome is measured against specific standards, not against other students.
- The standards relate to industry. (p. 123)

Other authors label CBT a behaviourist model with a lack of connection to the personal attributes associated with students shaping their own learning and their construction of personal meaning (Billett et al., 1998; Misko, 1999).

From this point onwards, my teaching environment became immersed in VET rhetoric: training reform, learning pathways, CBT, training for work, on-the-job assessment, the Australian Quality Training Framework, recognition of prior learning – and the list goes on. It was now mandated that my teaching become prescriptive and didactic. Smith and Keating (2003) attest to this picture of the VET curriculum being specified in behavioural terms, aligned with industry standards, modularised and focused on outcomes. How was I to respond to this Taylorist rational model of curriculum development (Tanner & Tanner, 1995), and how would it shape my teaching? My response was an almost unconscious filtering of these happenings through the lens of Freire (1970) and Habermas (1972, 1973).

Freire's (1970) concept of banking education was immediately brought to mind. It was (and is) my belief that this VET paradigm put teachers in the role of handing over knowledge to receptive, passive students. Freire would suggest that this is not the process of knowing together which occurs through a dialogical and problem-solving process. VET would argue that its role is in modernising education for economic development, but I would take the Freireian perspective and say that it appears to fail by keeping individuals from seeing their own potential for bringing

about change in relation to the real concerns of society and that it is education and training for maintaining the *status quo*, where capitalism, disadvantage and passivity towards political rhetoric remain, and accuse it of having "…little regard for values, attitudes and underpinning knowledge…" (Lundberg, 1994, p. 15).

This social conditioning of knowledge (Freire, 1973) was a personal concern, particularly if it meant that if I taught using the VET community services curriculum I could well run the risk of being complicit in graduating community workers who had a superficial level of the knowing of reality, or naïve transitive consciousness, as opposed to the more important critical consciousness. If I look at the activities of community workers, I see that their important work is in social reform at the micro, meso and macro levels of our society. Misko (1999) asks rhetorically, "Where is the critical in CBT?", and implies that it is nowhere. I support this notion and believe that CBT is not well suited for the development of the conceptual and experiential knowledge required by community workers.

My perceptions and ideologies influenced my practice in such a manner that I chose a non-prescriptive pedagogy. During classroom interaction I prompted much dialogical debate and provided opportunities for individuals to pursue items of their own interest within the context of the modules that I taught. This produced the expression of many and varied attitudes and values, sometimes to the disgust of some students who appeared not to be able to accept that others hold differing perceptions from themselves. This I must say sat well with my criticality. On a few occasions, I was approached by a minority of students who did not agree with the way that I was teaching. They suggested that I "put these students straight…that it was my role as teacher to control their leanings…[and] not allow controversial views…". My response was to continue with this approach, as the majority of students reported that they were invigorated by the discussions, which often continued outside the confines of the classroom. To my mind this was an indication that the pedagogy enabled students to engage deeply with the material. But big brother was watching.

As a consequence of some students seeking higher redress about the manner of my critical classroom engagements, I was instructed by management to ensure that "class discussion was to be kept to a minimum" and "to put processes in place to ensure that no one would be offended by what was said in class". Further, I was to provide them with assessment items that were clearly behaviourist in their expectations. And, as a parting gesture in the discussion, I was told that my contract renewal was dependent on making these changes. Clearly TAFE did not agree with Freire (1970, 1973).

With my fingers rapped and worried about my own and my family's economic survival, I toed the company line. For me, this time was extremely emotionally laboursome (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) . The incongruence between the VET teaching paradigm and my criticality, along with what I saw as an act of oppression by TAFE management, and the fact that I had to reface my classes with an obvious change to my teaching style, produced affective internal tension. I had to manage my emotions, firstly to meet the expectation of TAFE management and those students who wanted a more controlled teaching environment and secondly to deal with my wish to act authentically according to my own philosophy of action, and not being able to do so explicitly.

In order to resolve this, I sought to meet higher management to deal with what I believed to be an important curriculum question as well as a significant professional issue – my teaching. In order to gather my resolve, I reflected on

Habermas (1972, 1973). Here I was about to act authentically and to engage in communicative action within a context governed by technical rules directed at goal attainment. My aim was to engage in robust debate around the pedagogies that I believed were suited to engaging and immersing students within the community human services courses. I was seeking consensual norms which would define management's reciprocal expectations and my own. Habermas (1972, 1973) could suggest that my intention was for purposive action, and that this action was informed by consensual norms, reciprocal expectations and grounded intersubjectivity (values).

It was during this meeting that I first came to realise how removed the VET positivist paradigm of Taylorism (Tanner & Tanner, 1995) was from Habermas's. The former puts action, in which goal attainment (reaching competency) predominates, at the expense of interpersonal relations. I concur with the Habermassian view in which norms, values and shared standards are decisive in the relationship between purposive-rational action and communicative action, for they give us reason to reflect – reason to draw new meaning outside a world of self-subsistent facts. This was at odds with the position of management who emphasised that I should teach to the competencies only and ensure that I did not present material or opinions which may offend or incite dissatisfaction, and that it was my responsibility to steer any discussion away from such matters if they arose. My thoughts were that "Management were not interested in engaging in debate, especially not about pedagogies and curriculum; the teaching paradigm of CBT is set and students are customers". I couldn't help but think that this was in fact the crisis that Habermas speaks of, the intrusion by state without critique.

Apart from more emotional labour on my part, this instance set me thinking about the autonomy of teachers and in particular the degree of power that they have in shaping the teaching environments in which they teach. At first I felt powerless. Then the rising bilious ball of bitterness got stuck in my throat. The managers with whom I had dealt had neither teacher training nor experience; they came from business backgrounds. Yet they were in positions in which they exercised power over me (qualified and experienced) in an environment with which they were unfamiliar and in a fashion that did not allow for fairness in dialogue or for negotiation. It was as if this view from the top was interpreted as "truth". The use of my contract renewal, along with the heavy emphasis on using CBT and students as customers, as techniques to make me change my ways were to my mind evidence of how power is used to create reality. Flybjerg, (1998) who provides evidence of this very phenomenon, explains: "…[the] use of power tends to be more effective than any appeal to objectivity, facts, knowledge, or rationality, even though feigned with versions of the latter, that is, rationalisation, may be used to legitimate naked power" (p. 232).

It might also be suggested that the situation outlined above was an act of cultural suicide (Brookfield, 1994) in which I undertook to question conventional assumptions, thereby risking exclusion from any support that might be provided by managers. This may well have been the case. But thankfully my criticality gave me solace, in that I knew that my truth came from dialogue and reflection. As a matter of survival, I choose to varnish the truth of my authenticity (Sweetland & Hoy, 2001) by opting for deceptive civility. I managed my presenting self to reveal to those in power what they wanted to know and see. My civility befitted the concept of a "good teacher", acting in moderation for the interests of the common good, as interpreted by TAFE, but only until my power-base grew.

On my part, three of the four actions that increased my power-base were studying and completing a higher degree, union membership and teacher registration. The remaining action, an application for permanency at TAFE, and the subsequent appointment as a permanent teacher, removed the sword of Damocles – the uncertainty of a continuing teaching contract.

Sweetland and Hoy (2001) talk about game playing in organisations in relation to principals and teachers spinning the truth in schools. They also cite Mintzberg (1983), who suggested that game playing is the means through which superiors and subordinates create their own versions of reality. As I articulated before, the powerful have an advantage in defining the "truth". I chose to make myself a more potent game player by increasing my power-base and thereby by having a greater ability to define my version of reality. I completed a Masters of Education Studies degree, joined the teachers union and became a union delegate. I became very familiar with the TAFE teaching award and with TAFE's human resource policies and procedures. I returned to former pedagogies and was ready to play.

It took two semesters for the managers in TAFE to react. And then reaction came from my prompting. I returned from holidays to find that a number of students to whom I had awarded a "resubmit" grade had not resubmitted their work. I accessed their records from the student administration system with the intention of awarding a "not yet competent" grade. To my surprise the results of these students had been upgraded in my absence to "competent". I investigated, and was told that the manager had upgraded the results after investigating the students' complaints regarding my teaching and assessment. I instigated an internal grievance process.

In the initial meeting, management highlighted past teaching practices. They said that, after their investigations on this matter, they believed that I had returned to these previous practices. They claimed that my teaching and my assessment strategies were inappropriate for TAFE, and therefore saw fit to upgrade the students' results. They recommended that I be disciplined. My response was a request for them to bring any evidence before an independent arbitrator of at least the same professional teaching level as myself, with the same or higher qualification level and with teaching content expertise and furthermore for them to furnish their teaching qualifications which allowed for a valid reinterpretation of my initial assessment of student results.

Next I received a directive to appear before the Institute Director. On the matter of the changes to the students' results, my initial assessment was vindicated. I was not called upon to prove that my pedagogies were appropriate, nor was there any attempt to have my teaching assessed. But my method of drawing attention to myself through the use of the official grievance procedure (which meant that the Director General, a superior to the Institute Director, was notified) was called under question. The Director warned that the "corporate memory is long" and that I best keep that in mind in the future. I took umbrage at this comment, and pointed out that I would continue to use the procedures available to me to ensure that my rights as a teacher were upheld. I parted with the reiterated offer that the director would be most welcome to find an independent assessor from the Board of Teacher Registration to assess my teaching and professionalism.

For the remainder of my time at TAFE (another six years), there was no intervention from management into my role as teacher. I continued to interpret the prescriptive curriculum of TAFE using a process model (Stenhouse, 1975), in which question-posing, robust debate and self-reflection were encouraged.

Conclusion

This paper has narrated the development and application of my "criticality" in both a reflective and a reflexive manner. Highlighted in this process was my developmental acquisition of various crucial lenses and how they have shaped my action within my professional world. The movement from humanistic perspectives (for example, Field, 1996; Nijre, 1969) which provided purchase in my day-to-day interactions in the human services industry to the critical approaches (for example, Freire, 1970, 1973; Habermas, 1972, 1973) that shaped my pedagogies within TAFE displayed a shifting and synthesising of philosophies of practice which provided the foundation to act with self-determined purpose and confidence. In keeping with what I espoused at the beginning of this paper, for me to act consistently and authentically, the methodology that I choose for my doctoral study needs to be bound by theories that inform my criticality. "A durable self can only be sustained…through critical self-reflection and authentic – and, thereby, critical – action" (Barnett, 1997, p. 63).

References

Ashforth, B. E., & Humphrey, R. H. (1993). Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity. *Academy of Management Review, 18*(1), 88–115.

Barnett, R. (1997). *Higher education: A critical business*. Buckingham, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Billett, S., Kavanagh, C., Beven, F., Hayes, S., Angus, L., Seddon, T., et al. (1998). *The CBT decade: Teaching for flexibility and adaptability*. Adelaide, SA: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Brady, L. (1990). *Curriculum development*. Sydney, NSW: Prentice Hall of Australia.

Brookfield, S, (1994). Tales from the dark side: A phenomenography of adult critical reflection. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 13*(3), 203–216.

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Field, S. (1996). Self-determination: Instructional strategies for youth with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29, 40–52.

Flybjerg, B. (1998). *Rationality and power: Democracy in practice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.

Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, J. (1973). *Theory and practice*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Hughes, C., & Agran, M. (1998). Introduction to the special issue on self-determination: Signalling systems change. *Journal of the Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps, 23*(1), 1–4.

Izzo, M., & Lamb, P. (2002). *Self-determination and career development: Skills for successful transitions to postsecondary education and employment*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Lundberg, D. (1994). *Where are we? Reviewing the training reform agenda*. Adelaide, SA: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Misko, J. (1999). *Competency-based training: Review of research*. Adelaide, SA: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Nirje, B. (1969). The normalization principle and its human management implications. In R. B. Kugel & W. Wolfensberger (Eds.), *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (pp. 197–195). Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.

Skilbeck, M. (1976). *School-based curriculum development and teacher education* (mimeograph). Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Smith, E., & Keating, J. (2003). *From training reform to training packages.* Tuggerah, NSW: Social Sciences Press.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development.* London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Sweetland, S. R., & Hoy, W. K. (2001). Varnishing the truth in schools – principals and teachers spinning reality. *Journal of Educational Administration, 39*(3), 282–294.

Tanner, D., & Tanner, L. (1995). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice.* Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall.

Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., Wood, W. M., Brewer, D. M., & Eddy, S. (2005). A conceptual framework of self-advocacy for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 26*(1), 43–54.

Williams, P., & Shoultz, B. (1982). *We can speak for ourselves: Self-advocacy by mentally handicapped people.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Wolfensberger, W. (1972). *Normalisation: The principle of normalization in human services.* Toronto, ON: National Institute on Mental Retardation.