

Critical Thinking in an Era of Standardization

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Influencing the formulation of best practices in teaching and learning has long been perceived as one of the goals of educational research. Much has been learned about the nature of teaching and learning and the results indicate that formulating best practices requires an intellectually complex set of constructs challenging the reflective nature of both the teacher and the learner. Critical thinking is believed to be among the goals of education and directly related to meaningful educational experiences, however, much of what continues to take place in classrooms is more closely associated with knowledge acquisition for the primary purpose of preparing students for taking tests. The assumption here is that answers are much more important than the questions that drive a deeper understanding of human experience. Teachers ask questions, primarily derived from textbooks and pre-packaged curricula. Students are determined successful or not based upon their ability to recall a memorized set of de-contextualized material, most often limited to lower level understandings. It is rare to see in

classrooms teachers and students engaged in more complex levels of understanding such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of content. This requires a deeper sense of context in which the knowledge is generated.

Many questions, issues, and competing ideas about effective teaching and learning have been debated in both educational and political circles for decades. Today's educational climate is dominated by legislated systems of accountability that has resulted in clearly prescriptive standards-based curricula and accompanying high-stakes testing regimens. State legislation throughout the nation in recent years has focused on the development and implementation of both standardized testing for students as well as highly accountable expectations of teachers. This has been based on the overwhelming assumption that good teaching can be both prescribed in specific terms and easily measured; that teaching and learning are rooted in technical skill acquisition rather than being recognized as a complex human activity deserving of intellectual inquiry and reflective practice. In the current era of standardized testing and increasing political pressure toward the nationalization of curricula, efforts to advance critical thinking within classrooms have received little attention. Emphasis in schools remains focused on knowledge acquisition and test taking skills at the expense of a more collaborative, problem-based approach utilizing critical thinking skills. Curricula continue to be viewed as something that

needs to be “covered” and ruled by routine tasks usually determined by policy makers and curriculum leaders rather than by teachers themselves. When subject matter content is perceived in this lower order manner, there lacks a basis for intellectually challenging exploration of deeper meanings of knowledge, as well as minimizing the importance of long-term understanding.

Much has been learned over the past twenty years about the ways in which learning occurs. A good deal of research has been conducted on the ways in which teaching and learning are manifested in classrooms that suggest that these activities are tied inextricably to interactive processes associated with critical thinking revolving around inquiry and discovery approaches to teaching and learning. Much of this research has important implications for viewing teaching as a co-constructive experience; actively engaged teachers and students collaborating toward deep and meaningful understanding of content. Theories associated with constructivist approaches to teaching and learning have gained attention, primarily among educators, however have yet to be embraced in educational policy making arenas. The idea that making sense of the world is a socially constructed phenomena flies in the face of traditional forms of top-down teaching that continue to dominate contemporary classroom processes.

How can we think productively about incorporating critical thinking into the ways in which we perceive the activities of teaching and learning?

And, how can critical thinking positively influence our notions of formulating best practices in both teaching and learning?

All fields of study, from the sciences, to history, mathematics, and language arts, are based upon the development of well-crafted questions that push the limits of existing content knowledge and posit new views and conceptual understandings. In other words, content knowledge is never static, but rather it flows in a fluid-like state of dynamic evolution. For example, scientists are continually re-defining their understanding of the cosmos; it's age and behavior, furthering their understanding through questioning and then questioning again. Questions drive knowledge production. Answers are merely fleeting and most often lead to further questions, and hence the evolving nature of knowledge production and application. Rarely, does this kind of understanding of knowledge and evolving understanding manifest itself in classroom practices. However, when it does, it reflects a much deeper view of teaching and learning than normally expected. We have all been students in classrooms, and have some well conceived notions about good teaching and meaningful learning. We can remember our best teachers, usually by counting them on one hand. What was it that those teachers did to inspire us, to beckon our investigative selves, to invite us into a world rich with exploration, intellectual analysis, and knowledge production? Clearly, the best of teachers view their work with students as

an intellectually challenging, inquiry-based approach wherein critical thought is central to academic outcomes.

So, the question arises, how best to promote critical thinking within teacher preparation programs, helping ensure a more meaningful, and less formula-driven and rote learning experience for students in classroom environments? Unfortunately, current policies governing the preparation of teachers are focused on an accountability system wherein emphasis is placed on highly prescriptive content standards and student outcomes are measured by standardized tests. The assumption is rather simplistic. Impart factual information to students and expect them to commit to memorization and become efficient multiple-choice item test takers. In other words, more testing will result in a better education for our children. Inadequate legislative attention has been paid to discovery-based learning, exploratory inquiry, critical analysis, and creative expression of contextually based content understanding, in part due to the complexities inherent in standardizing a valid assessment system, and to the political stance taken that the education of students is best done in a mechanized, normalized, assembly line fashion.

In affecting the formulation of best practices in teaching and learning, the ways in which we perceive the work of teachers need to be reconsidered from both theoretical and political viewpoints. Classroom practice is generally based on routines developed for controlling student behavior rather than on notions of liberation; the exploration of ideas and

critical thought associated with adventurous and powerful learning. The goal of teaching then becomes something quite different than the acquisition of skills and dispositions outlined in learning to teach textbooks. It becomes alive with curiosity and questioning. It becomes the basis for a rich and deep engagement into what it means to be human. How is that we can make sense of ourselves and the world around us without employing critical thinking as a tool for understanding that very interconnectedness? A critical pedagogy is a liberating pedagogy and critical thinking becomes the method by which a powerful education is enacted.

As Elliot Eisner once asked, is what you do as a teacher “liberating or limiting?” We must challenge ourselves with the question of what it means to be an educated person and what it means to engage in critical thinking throughout the educational experiences of both teachers and students. The development of critical thinking skills is directly related to the essential responsibility of formulating best practices for teaching and learning. In as much as critical thinking is overlooked in school systems, clearly it is those teachers who challenge students in powerful ways, operating from a critical pedagogical perspective, who are the beacons of the teaching profession.