

## An Excerpt from: The Getting of Wisdom: What Critically Reflective Teaching is and Why It's Important<sup>1</sup>

By Stephen Brookfield from *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995

### Why is Critical Reflection Important ?

Given that critical reflection entails all kinds of risks and complexities, there have to be some compelling reasons why anyone would choose to begin the critical journey. Few of us are likely to initiate a project that promises enlightenment only at the cost of masochism. Choosing to become critically reflective will only happen if we see clearly that is in our own best interests. Otherwise, given the already overcrowded nature of our lives, why should we bother to take this activity seriously ? I believe there are six reasons why learning critical reflection is important.

### It Helps Us Take Informed Actions

Simple utilitarianism dictates that critical reflection is an important habit for teachers to develop. As is evident from the examples scattered throughout this chapter, becoming critically reflective raises our chances of taking informed actions. By informed actions I mean actions that are based on assumptions that have been carefully and critically investigated. These actions can be explained and justified to ourselves and others. If a student or colleague asks us why we're doing something, we can show how our action springs from certain assumptions we hold about teaching and learning. We can then lay out the evidence (experiential as well as theoretical) that undergirds these and we can make a convincing case for their accuracy.

An informed action is one that has a good chance of achieving the consequences intended. It is an action that is taken against a backdrop of inquiry into how people perceive what we say and do. When we behave in certain ways we expect our students and colleagues to read into our behaviors the meanings we intend. Frequently, however, our words and actions are given meanings that are very different from, and sometimes directly antithetical to, those we intended. When we have seen our practice through others' eyes we are in a much better position to speak and behave in ways that ensure that a consistency of meaning exists between us, our students and our colleagues. This consistency of meaning increases the likelihood that our actions have the effects we want.

### It Helps Us Develop a Rationale for Practice

The critically reflective habit confers a deeper benefit than that of procedural utility. It grounds not only our actions, but also our sense of who we are as teachers in an examined reality. We know why we believe what we believe. A critically reflective teacher is much better placed to communicate to colleagues and students (as well as to herself) the rationale behind her practice. She works from a position of informed commitment. She knows why she does and thinks, what she does and thinks. Knowing this she communicates to students a confidence-inducing sense of being grounded. This sense of groundedness stabilizes her when she feels swept along by forces she cannot control.

A critical rationale grounds our most difficult decisions in core beliefs, values and assumptions about which we feel some confidence. As I found out when interviewing students for *The Skillful Teacher* (1990a), a teacher's ability to make clear what it is that she stands for, and why she believes this is important, is a crucial factor in establishing her credibility with students. Even students who disagree fundamentally with a teacher's rationale gain confidence from knowing what it is. In this instance knowledge really is power. According to students, the worst position to be in is to sense that a teacher has an agenda and a preferred way of working, but not to know exactly what these are. Without this information, they complain, how can they trust the teacher or know what they're dealing with ?

A critical rationale for practice is a psychological, professional and political necessity. Without it we are tossed about by whatever political or pedagogical winds are blowing at the time. A rationale serves as a methodological and ethical anchor. It provides a foundational reference point - a set of continually tested beliefs that we can consult as a guide to help us decide how we should act in unpredictable situations. But a critical rationale for practice is not a static, for all time construct. It is shaped in a particular context and needs to keep adapting to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/facultypapers/StephenBrookfield\\_Wisdom.cfm](http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/facultypapers/StephenBrookfield_Wisdom.cfm)

different circumstances. Although our foundational beliefs (such as a commitment to democratic process or a belief in critical thinking) can remain essentially unchanged, we keep learning different ways to realize them in our work.

### **It Helps Us Avoid Self-Laceration**

If we are critically reflective we are also less prone to self-laceration. A tendency of teachers who take their work seriously is for them to blame themselves if students are not learning. These teachers feel that at some level they are the cause of the anger, hostility, resentment or indifference that even the best and most energetic of them are bound to encounter from time to time. Believing themselves to be the cause of these emotions and feelings, they automatically infer that they are also their solution. They take upon themselves the responsibility for turning hostile, bored or puzzled students into galvanized advocates for their subjects brimming over with the joys of learning. When this doesn't happen (as is almost always the case) these teachers allow themselves to become consumed with guilt for what they believe is their pedagogic incompetence.

Critically reflective teachers who systematically investigate how their students are experiencing learning know that much student resistance is socially and politically sculpted. Realizing that resistance to learning often has nothing to do with what they've done as teachers, helps them make a healthier, more realistic appraisal of their own role in, or responsibility for, creating resistance. They learn to stop blaming themselves and they develop a more accurate understanding of the cultural and political limits to their ability to convert resistance into enthusiasm.

### **It Grounds Us Emotionally**

Critical reflection also grounds us emotionally. When we neglect to clarify and question our assumptions, and when we fail to research our students, we have the sense that the world is governed by chaos. Whether or not we do well seems to be largely a matter of luck. Lacking a reflective orientation we place an unseemly amount of trust in the role of chance. We inhabit what Freire (1993) calls a condition of magical consciousness. Fate or serendipity are seen as shaping educational process, rather than human agency. The world is experienced as arbitrary, as governed by a whimsical God.

When we think this way we are powerless to control the ebbs and flows of our emotions. One day a small success causes us to blow our level of self-confidence out of all proportion. The next, an equally small failure (such as one bad evaluative comment out of twenty good ones) is taken as a devastating indictment of our inadequacy. Teachers caught on this emotional roller coaster, where every action either confirms their brilliance or underscores their failure, cannot survive intact for long. Either they withdraw from the classroom or they are forced to suppress (at their eventual peril) the emotional underpinning to their daily experiences. So the critically reflective habit is connected to teachers' morale in powerful ways.

### *It Enlivens Our Classrooms*

It is important to realize the implications for our students of our own critical reflection. Students put great store by our actions and they learn a great deal from observing how we model intellectual inquiry and democratic process. Given that this is so, a critically reflective teacher activates her classroom by providing a model of passionate skepticism. As Osterman (1990) comments, "critically reflective teachers - teachers who make their own thinking public, and therefore subject to discussion - are more likely to have classes that are challenging, interesting, and stimulating for students" (p. 139).

We know that students observe us closely and that they are quick to notice and condemn any inconsistency between what we say we believe and what we actually do. They tell us that seeing a teacher model critical thinking in front of them is enormously helpful to their own efforts to think dialectically. By openly questioning our own ideas and assumptions - even as we explain why we believe in them so passionately - we create an emotional climate in which accepting change and risking failure are valued. By inviting students to critique our efforts - and by showing them that we appreciate these critiques and treat them with the utmost seriousness - we deconstruct traditional power dynamics and relationships that stultify critical inquiry. A teacher who models critical inquiry into her own practice is one of the most powerful catalysts for critical thinking in her own students. For this reason, if for no other, engaging in critical reflection should become perhaps the most important indicator we look for in any attempt to judge teachers' effectiveness.

### **It Increases Democratic Trust**

What we do as teachers makes a difference in the world. In our classrooms students learn democratic or manipulative behavior. They learn whether independence of thought is really valued, or whether everything

depends on pleasing the teacher. They learn either that success depends on beating someone to the prize using whatever advantage they can, or on working collectively. Standing above the fray by saying that our practice is a-political is not an option for a teacher. Even if we profess to have no political stance, and to be concerned purely with furthering inquiry into a discrete body of objective ideas or practices, what we do counts. The ways we encourage or inhibit students' questions, the kinds of reward systems we create, and the degree of attention we pay to their concerns, all create a moral tone and a political culture.

Teachers who have learned the reflective habit know something about the effects they are having on students. They are alert to the presence of power in their classrooms and to its possibilities for misuse. Knowing that their actions can silence or activate students' voices, they listen seriously and attentively to what students say. They deliberately create public reflective moments when students' concerns - not the teacher's agenda - are the focus of classroom activity. Week in, week out, they make public disclosure of private realities, both to their students and to their colleagues. They make constant attempts to find out how students are experiencing their classes and they make this information public. All their actions are explicitly grounded in reference to students' experiences, and students know and appreciate this.

Trust is the thread that ties these practices together. Through their actions teachers build or diminish the amount of trust in the world. Coming to trust another person is the most fragile of human projects. It requires knowing someone over a period of time and seeing their honesty modeled in their actions. College classrooms provide the conditions in which people can learn to trust or mistrust each other. A teacher who takes students seriously and treats them as adults shows that she can be trusted. A teacher who emphasizes peer learning shows that it's important to trust other students. A teacher who encourages students to point out to her what about her actions is oppressive, and who seeks to change what she does in response to their concerns, is a model of critical reflection. Such a teacher is one who truly is trustworthy.

#### Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, critical reflection is inherently ideological. It is also morally grounded. It springs from a concern to create the conditions under which people can learn to love one another, and it alerts them to the forces that prevent this. Being anchored in values of justice, fairness and compassion, critical reflection finds its political representation in the democratic process. Since it is difficult to show love to others when we are divided, suspicious and scrambling for advantage, critical reflection urges us to create conditions under which each person is respected, valued and heard. In pedagogic terms this means the creation of democratic classrooms. In terms of professional development it means an engagement in critical conversation. The rest of this book explores how both these projects can be realized.