

Critical Thinking with Nowhere to Go

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Critical thinking is often a goal of educators at all levels. From Bloom's revised taxonomy, surface vs. deep learning, the hierarchy of learning objectives often places cognitive critical thinking at the top of the pyramid. It is often discussed as a prerequisite to higher levels of self-awareness. Reflection, Critical reflection, etc. An existential goal of self-awareness is authenticity, in which our actions are aligned with our thoughts. But to what extent do the constraints of our lives pose challenges to the concept of authenticity? In what senses can we be free to align our thoughts and actions? In what ways can we free our students in the pursuit of thinking critically, not only about themselves, but about the constraints they bump into?

Critiques and definitions of critical thinking abound; in the short span of this presentation I will work from Dewey's (1933) definition of critical thinking. He defines it as an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the **grounds that support it** and the **further conclusions to which it tends**" (p. 118).

I'll share a specific example of *fostering* critical thinking to set us on our path: My friend Dr. Sultana Shabazz teaches in a women's prison. In her history class, she uses a critical feminist historical text (Evans, 1997). She shows the ways in which some stories of history are enhanced or downright contradicted when seen with the lens of feminism. So these adult students have learned a decidedly non-feminist history and actively, persistently, and carefully consider it, its grounds, and its conclusions. They use the feminist lens as a structure, another set of ideas, to support this consideration.

Sometimes when we carefully consider our beliefs and knowledge, we develop very different conclusions from those we held before. Students may begin to see injustice where before they did not and begin to seek ways to change things. But various obstacles may prevent

all of us from enacting changes in and with our bodies, homes, and communities. In this paper I offer an extreme case of such obstacles: Dr. Shabazz' students in many areas of their lives are prevented by the institution, rules, walls, and bars of prison. They are critically thinking with nowhere to go.

What I will describe next is my experience as a guest in Dr. Shabazz' class. A few other colleagues and I were invited to take part in a discussion with her students on culture and politics. In order to give you a way to enter into the prison I have poeticized my notes. After the poeticized notes, I will discuss concepts of freedom in education as they relate to prison education and education generally.

The Discussion

Before they entered: sitting nervous, small talk amongst us, glancing around. A classroom like any other, yet out the windows the fences abound.

My friend, their teacher: a Black woman scholar writer workaholic easygoing fighter, a critical pedagogue if ever I knew one.

They enter, in jumpsuits, individuals is what they're called now. They used to allow Prisoner, inmate, but these terms have been left behind. If you don't mind, they prefer convict. They are Black, Latina, Asian-American, First Nations, White. They are talking, joking, walking in, sitting down at desks with seemingly no stress—there would be no tests over this class session. And no homework either.

A Q&A: after introductions, we were asked genuinely how to learn, how to remember, strategies that seem off topic, but reveal the relevance of our assumed

and often unquestioned skills as scholars to those who may have never succeeded in school. Soon my status as the only guy in the room disappears, my fears too.

They tell us of class projects and the objects of their studies: why do women stay in abusive relationships, why is cafeteria food out-sourced and where is the lettuce, why do convicts end up inside again and again. Questions to which they bring newfound theory, sing embodied knowledge, and ring with glimmers of hope. We ask them questions, interest piqued. They proudly relay details of food sales, Stockholm syndrome, and restricting relations.

We talk Politics: Trump, “a chump” who will “throw away the key,” Clinton, “at least she’s not Trump,” and a game to guess: who is teacher voting for? Awww, you know she’s a Trump supporter! No way! Tell us, tell us! Why won’t you tell us?

We learn of injustice. Stealing veggies from the award-winning garden program risks severe punishment. The librarians joined the nationwide strike over prison wages. They were removed from their coveted posts and put in isolation.

We see the dynamics: The class clown frowns, “I guess I shouldn’t have eaten the whole tub of icing,” top of the class talks Maslow’s hierarchy. A Latina tells us she’s “on vacation” from gang life, an older Black woman would love to get a job as a janitor to avoid going back to drugs, again. Earnest, sarcastic, real, intelligent. Confined, hopeful.

Prison Education

What we witnessed, I was sure, was not typical prison education. The stereotype is job skills and GEDs, and it is not unfounded: every federal prison allows convicts to attain high

school equivalency (U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.). More rare is the kind of partnership with colleges I witnessed. Money for college for convicts is limited, although Obama did work to re-open Pell Grants to felons. We do not know the future of such programs now, but we can speculate. So college programs exist, and many educators feel their role in prison education is to create just the kind of space we witnessed: one of civility, authenticity, and dialogue (Wright & Gehring, 2008). But that is a source of frustration and confusion for me based on the discussion with Dr. Shabazz' students, as I will explain.

In their health class, they studied nutrition, healthy choices, and food justice. They learned that their access, although they did not live in a food desert, was limited to such poor nutritional choices that the best they could do was choose less un-healthy items. The salad bar had been removed. The contract with Sodexo disallowed inclusion of the prison garden's produce. Knowledge, in this case, did not mean power, and may have even exacerbated the convicts' powerlessness.

Her students explained the unfairness of prison labor and compensation they received for it. Of the 42 cents an hour, some was taxed, some was held for their debts. So the pittance they received seemed to be used in what sounded to me like the company store. Examples were made of those that participated in the nationwide strike. It sounded easy to quell dissent in prison: the few freedoms, joys, or diversions from and/or composing their routine were stripped if they "caused trouble."

And can one learn social theories and avoid causing trouble? If they learned of power structures that confined them both on the inside and out, what could they do? Identifying a problem is one of many steps along the way to solving it. Abusive relationships are difficult to escape when release from prison is unaccompanied by support. Yet Dr. Shabazz, like other

prison educators (Cantrell, 2013), seeks to build agency within her students not only to reduce recidivism, but to encourage activism on the part of prisoners *once they were released* (Shabazz, Sohn, Harness, & Aronson, *manuscript in review*). For she knows that her excitement at teaching critically must be tempered by the knowledge that her students' freedom is always on the line.

Critical Thinking and Freedom

In Dr. Shabazz' classroom, her students, while they may have nowhere to go right now, speak with determination and hope about their futures. One might guess cynically that they are naïve about getting out and being "free at last." Yet some of these women have been out, and in, and out and in, again. Many of them, because they have lived it, are well aware of the situated nature of freedom. As Merleau-Ponty says,

What then is freedom? To be born is both to be born of the world and born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways at once. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice...(Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2010, p. 527)

The world is constituted: the convicts have families, friends, races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses. Yet agency at times defies social theories of power and privilege. And so it may be that prison provides new opportunities for creativity *because* of its limitations, as Shabazz says, not unlike a haiku: "You've stripped me of the outside world—now what can I be?"

What offers potential for being, becoming something new? Mezirow's transformative theory of adult learning (1978; 2000) was devised from a large-scale study of women returning

to higher education in the 1970s, a time of social upheaval and cultural change for women. He noted that one of the barriers for many of the study participants were relationships that constricted them, conditioned them into the roles they had before returning to school. I imagine the kinds of relationships in the life of the convict who was a gang member. In prison, she said, she could chill out.

But the course of my discussion of freedom so far seems to focus on what Maxine Greene (1988) referred to as “negative freedom:” the kind of freedom glorified in the USA—the open desert road, Westward expansion, freedom *from* the burdens and constraints of others. But I think at least part of the reason I saw as much joy as I did in the faces of the convicts in the discussion was because of a kind of *collective* freedom they experienced through critical examination of the world and their lives in it. For Greene, one goal of education is to create spaces where people

can appear before one another as, to quote Hannah Arendt, “the best they know how to be.” Such a space requires the provision of opportunities for the articulation of multiple perspectives in multiple idioms, out of which something common can be brought into being...In contexts of this kind, open contexts where persons attend to another with interest, regard, and care, there is a place for the appearance of freedom, the achievement of freedom by people in search of themselves. (Greene, 1988, p. xi)

I do not seek to glorify or romanticize prison; surely some of the women I met may have written their story another way, had they the chance. But as a phenomenologist, I try to suspend what I think I know. I try to recognize the difference between an experience of freedom and an objective account of it. Victor Frankl in a concentration camp and Nelson

Mandela in an apartheid prison came to similar conclusions: the mind/spirit could not be controlled in prison. They found a freedom that could not be taken away. In Dr. Shabazz' classroom I think I saw that kind of freedom at work. She put it this way:

Education for them becomes not just the means to an end (job) but the possibility of a new becoming. Education becomes a transformative practice that moves them from who they were toward who they think they could be. And, only through this transformation can...life...be envisioned on the outside. They talk about this new state incessantly: restating it, reframing it...They mentor, coddle, push, castigate each other in service to this new state. (Shabazz et al., *manuscript in review*)

So perhaps at times the four walls of prison, like the four walls of the classroom, permit an isolation from outside influence that, coupled with hope, critical education, and the guidance of a loving teacher, may be seen in a positive light.

Conclusion

We know it is often the guidance of that teacher—who may feel conflicted because they are a part of the system (Hartnett, Wood, McCann, 2011)—that can stoke the sparks that have been silenced, or turn a student dream into a waking, complicated goal. The teacher can encourage some of the practices of citizenship (Wright & Ghering, 2008). Behind bars, or with “the chosen ones,” as Dr. Shabazz refers to students at universities like most of the ones we work at, teaching critical thinking is a challenge with no easily definable end. We must, I think, take on the idea that “somewhere to go” with critical thinking be the driving force behind fostering it. The privilege provided by an educational space is to, if even momentarily, get students to stop thinking about the rent and start “possibilizing a different future” (Greene, 1988).

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