# Critical Pedagogy and Reflexivity:

The Issue of Ethical Consistency

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#### Abstract

This article approaches the issue of developing a consistent ethical stance in educational practice. It is suggested that reflection alone is insufficient and that it is necessary to call on a form of critical reflexivity, which recognises the embodied nature of the practitioner's response to the world. If a practitioner wishes to adopt a particular ethical stance, they need to be clear about how they themselves contribute to their own conditioning, and how that conditioning is embedded not only in cognition, but also in the body. Educational practice in action cannot be divorced from the essential nature of the practitioner, who is a psycho-physical unity. Change of practice, in the service of humanisation, is possible, but involves not only an intelligent critique of self and world, but awareness of how action is manifesting in the moment in classroom or school-related interaction.

John Dewey's understanding of the nature of psycho-physical unity, together with the phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty are used as possible contributions towards consistency in conscientization.

Keywords: Transformation, consistency, critical reflexivity, embodiment

Critical Pedagogy and Reflexivity: The Issue of Ethical Consistency "(T)he key to a correct theory of morality is recognition of the essential unity of the self and its acts". (Dewey (1932) as cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 343)

"The world is 'already there' ... as an inalienable presence". (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p.vii)

How might an educational practitioner ensure their own action in the world matches their espoused moral stance? Is there a problem here at all, or do those who wish to be transformative in their practice automatically become consistent in thought and action? One aspect of Freire's concept of conscientization is that individuals develop a deepening awareness of both the socio-cultural world and their own potential for transforming that world (Freire, 1998). This article is about deepening awareness of self in the world, in the context of consistency of thought and action. It proposes a view of self as a psycho-physical unity, deeply connected to, and involved in, the world. I will suggest that consistency must be learned in the face of how we have already allowed ourselves to be formed and that we can do so by using reflexive critical insight into both a unitary self and the world which that self opens on to.

The challenge for an educational practitioner who wants to be true to their moral creed, whether in the classroom, or in management and leadership, is to recognise any mismatch between creed and action. Reflection alone might help recognition, but I will suggest it is insufficient of itself. However, in critical reflexivity, our embodied transactions, as well as intelligent critique of the world, have to be taken into account. This bi-directional critical awareness is much more than reflection. Through it we can be aware of the external impositions that the world makes on us (e.g. in through policy decisions), critiquing them for their capacity to promote or impede the desired end of humanisation. But we also need to critique ourselves, to see if our own actions perpetuate the very cycle from which we hope to escape.

# The importance of context

Writing in support of critical reflexivity makes a demand on the writer to be transparent about their own context and agenda (e.g. Bourdieu, 2004) so I lay out below the professional, moral and theoretical context in which I am writing. I am currently an initial teacher-educator in an English university, with a background as a high school teacher of languages. Sadly, I did not come to know Freire's work whilst I was still a high-school teacher. I think it would have helped me have a clearer understanding of what seemed to me to be a culture of domination and disempowerment in our state schooling system. Two aspects of this are relevant here: the hierarchical structure of school management which privileged senior leadership at the expense of the "rest", and a tendency to hold back knowledge from learners categorised as anything less than of the highest ability. I think that the former rather less than democratic attitude led to the latter by encouraging classroom teachers to view students as "lacking" and as vessels to be filled by the teachers who held the power on the basis on being more knowledgeable.

Although I had not encountered Freire, I had studied the thinking on psychophysical unity of John Dewey and F. M. Alexander and knew that the way we really think is revealed in our actions. We can hold certain ideas to be true and worthwhile and yet behave in a way which gives the contrary message. If we espouse a particular moral stance, say a belief that students are entitled to the same sort of respect which we would pay to the school director, we have to ensure our way of acting is consistent with that belief. I discovered in myself that I could pay lip-service to a way of thinking but continue to act in a habitual way which announced a different personal agenda. Using Dewey and Alexander's insights, I worked to bring consistency to my own behaviour by becoming aware of how both thought and action can be habitual and embodied.

When I moved into teacher-education in an English university, I was lucky enough to discover Freire's work through collaborating on the development and teaching of a Master's programme for educational practitioners based on critical pedagogy. Much data was collected from the graduates of this programme, but in the article I draw on one particular in-depth interview with one MA participant, Gary, who kindly gave permission to quote from his experience of applying critical reflexivity in his practice. Gary is a Mathematics teacher and assistant school director and therefore provides a view from classroom and from management and leadership.

The theoretical framework I use in this article is based on Freire's writing, as well as that of John Dewey, especially his work with F. M. Alexander, together with Charles Taylor's interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas of embodied perception. Freire and Dewey's work supply the moral context, where change is "about doing on the basis of a language of hope" (McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. 3). My personal experience as an educator has been that an increasing awareness of the world, together with the smallness of one's own agency can lead to a sense of hopelessness. The privileging of hope as an ethical principle by critical pedagogues therefore seems to me crucial. Why bother to work to change self and world if not for the hope that we can contribute to "the propagation of communities and societies in which we can struggle towards a better local and global future"? (Freire as cited in McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. xi)

By having the "better future" as our goal, we are necessarily suggesting social change. I think both Freire and Dewey make clear that without the change of the individual, there can be no real social change. Dewey suggests that although induction into society is a function of schooling, it is not an assimilative induction. The nature of schooling should be such that it gives individuals the capacity to construct a better world, and at the same time to reconstruct themselves: "education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness ... the adjustment of individual activity is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (Dewey, 1897/1964, p. 437). Dewey and Freire share a moral vision where

we become ourselves more fully, but not at the expense of others, nor in isolation from them: "To be human is to engage with relationships with others and with the world" (Freire, 1976, p. 3). Such a vision is about becoming more fully what we could be and in that sense is a move towards humanisation. I am suggesting that such a move can be achieved for the educational practitioner through critical reflexivity.

### Reflexivity in the literature

There is already a history of education literature advocating reflexivity in a range of environments (Bleakley, 1999; Cunliffe, 2004: Edge, 2011; Rolfe, 1997; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) as well as critiquing it (e.g. Lynch, 2000). Particularly relevant in the advocacy group is Moore (2007) who reminds teachers that awareness of how their students behave is only half of their task, suggesting they should be "encouraged to interrogate and critically reflect not only on their pupils' behaviour or upon what happened (in terms of failure or success) in the classroom, but also on their own behaviours—on the way in which they responded to situations, interacted with other people" (pp. 130-1). This form of awareness of our own behaviour would seem to draw on Giddens' (1991) view of reflexivity as monitoring, where "human beings routinely 'keep in touch' with the grounds of what they do as an integral element of doing it" (p. 36). My concern is that the difficulty of being in touch both with our operant theories and our behaviour as manifested in action, is greater than, say, Giddens and Moore suggest.

However, only two authors tackle the issue of unseen habitual patterns or the embodied aspect of being reflexive. One is Moore (1997), cited above, who refers to our embodied responses to situations and interaction with others. The other author is Cunliffe (2004), who in referring to "embodied, (whole body) responsive understanding" (p. 410) is not explicit that both parties in an interaction manifest a physical response, noting simply that "we react to eye contact, movement and facial expressions" (p.415). There is room for both Moore and Cunliffe to go further in emphasising the importance of embodiment.

Some view reflexivity as nothing more than a not-to-be challenged big and more sophisticated sister of reflection, and thereby limit it to being a mental process (D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007; Erlandson, 2005). I argue that reflexivity is extended reflection, in that it includes the embodied self and its response to the other selves with whom that self interacts, and that it incorporates thoughtful action in the moment—Dewey's "thinking in activity" (Alexander, 1985, p. 42). Such a holistic view allows for consideration of how we can make some attempt to ensure our action, including our reaction to others, and our espoused ethical stance are consistent.

A serious objection to any kind of reflective activity is raised by Lawes (2003), who points out the potential of self-interrogation as a means for domination of

the individual by others. I hope to convey in the following account a sense of what I see as the liberating aspect of reflexivity, in contrast to one that renders the operator of it more docile and responsive to manipulation (Foucault, 1993, 1995), which occurs through increasing capacity for the exercise of intelligent responsibility for creative ends (Freire, 1972).

#### The need to include awareness of self and world

If our aim is to function within an educational system and a set of communities where humanisation is the goal, then Dewey's work on self as a psychophysical unity and at the same time, as part of the world, provides a tool. Dewey's ideas here can be complemented by Merleau-Ponty's (1996), for both insist on our inability to be separate from the world: "The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside of myself" (p. 407). It is this inter-relatedness of self and world which must be the focus of critical reflexivity. We ourselves are the embodiment of our ethical view; the self is revealed by action, visible to others, and revealed back to self through a kind of immediate recognition of our own behaviour.

Gary's example below illustrates the change he was able to make having thought deeply about critical reflexivity on the MA. He explains, generalising from a particular interaction with a student, how he had a habitual pattern of behaviour, which was a response to fear of his authority being challenged.

When a student does something which you don't feel is appropriate in front of you, it is not necessarily a direct challenge to your authority. And in fact sometimes they think they are interacting with you in a friendly way and you take it wrongly because you don't understand where they are coming from and then tell them off when they have tried in their own way to be friendly towards you. Sometimes their over-friendliness comes out as a bad choice of language and it's not that they are being insulting or abusive but just when they get excited or get carried away they choose what I consider to be a poor use of language but it's the best that they've got. But after doing the assignment I realised that I know that student. They are not abusive or offensive, so why have they just chosen that language? It was the only thing they could get in a rush to fit that situation. Before, I would have shouted at them and they would have gone away and never tried it again. (Gary, personal communication, September 20, 2011)

Here we see an increase in Gary's awareness of the world. He is able to split out a situation into the behaviour of the student, which he can then rationalise, and his own habitual response to that behaviour. His espoused ethical position is that he considers it right to encourage communication between himself and students on what we could call a real human level. that is, not the level of dominance and submission. Such communication

is essential, he believes, if he is to succeed in helping that student find more "appropriate" ways of relating to adults. In the moment of awareness, Gary opens up a choice to himself, which gives him a new possibility in his relationship as teacher- to-student.

In the next extract we see the theme of possibilities opening up as the habitual reaction to a situation is recognised. Gary notes the physiological response which accompanies the habitual thinking:

I'm beginning to see things from other perspectives, for example in meetings which can become quite heated. I felt myself wanting to argue my case of why all the things that everyone else said were wrong . . . and I felt myself becoming warm and heated. And then I reflected that no, it's a collegial debate and in this instance you have been overruled and then I felt for a little while that I had lost face. But then I thought, you haven't. You've seen other people bring things up and not get them through and you haven't felt any differently towards them. (Gary, personal communication, September 20, 2011)

In addition to the insight of embodiment of response within his own physiology, Gary is deepening his awareness of his habitual fear of being wrong; he pauses to rationalise based on a new observation about how he and the world work, and again, opens up to himself a new possibility for thought and action. He summarises the result here:

... I feel more empowered in my relationships with colleagues and students, and with failure as well, in being able to rationalise it and not take it personally by being reflexive. I feel empowered when I talk to colleagues, but because they are not reflexive and they have no idea how to be reflexive and they are sort blundering from one point to another. (Gary, personal communication, September 20, 2011)

Gary saw at that point how without critical reflexivity, there is an inevitability about our behaviour, because "you do things automatically. You respond to situations automatically."

Automaticity makes it hard for us to change. Dewey's discovered from his own experience with F. M. Alexander (Door, 2009) that the way we think is not separable from how we have learned to operate as a psycho-physical unity. He describes "our own psycho-physical disposition, as the basic condition of our employment of all agencies and energies ... as the central instrumentality" (Dewey, 1923, in Alexander, 2004, pp. xxxi-xxxii). And it is that 'central instrumentality' which is seen by other people. However, inclusion of the body in our consideration of our own behaviour does not immediately provide us with information about that behaviour. A grand assumption we *might* make is that we know what we are doing. But, as Dewey maintains: "[t]he hardest thing to attend to is that which is closest to ourselves, that which is constant and familiar. And this closest 'something' is, precisely, ourselves, our own habits and ways of doing things as agencies, in conditioning what is tried or done by us" (Dewey, 1923/2004, p. xxxi). Intelligent thinking, which I conceptualise here as an important part of reflexive conduct, includes those two elements: the realisation that 'we' are psycho-physical entities and that it is hard to see what we are really doing because it is familiar.

For Gary, a pre-requisite for consistency of ethics and action was an admission that we have a limited awareness of how we manifest in the objective world of our institution, how we are perceived by others, and the impact we have on them. He started to develop this awareness consciously, having seen in small instances, as reported above, how he tended to act in a way that was not consistent with his ideals. In the admission of limited awareness and in tiny steps of action, he created the conditions for an openness to the world which is in opposition to the closure and stifling of possibility represented by: "Before, I would have shouted at them and they would have gone away and never tried it again" (Gary, 2011). In a sense the openness is unavoidable; because we are so much part of the world, "it is the natural setting of and field for all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. xi). In critical reflexivity, we don't search for the truth about how we are in this world through introspection, as "there is no inner man, man is in the world and only in the world does he know himself" (1996, p. xi). Instead, in a reflexive step, we assess the assumptions that lie behind our own actions when we actually spot them, and re-think them, either in the moment or later on, in a way that allows for some element of the new. This way must not be dominated by previously undisclosed (to us) habitual patterns, patterns which prevent new thoughts and thus new possibilities for action. As such, we are reading self and world in order to be open to the new. In this account, critical reflexivity encompasses reflection and pre-reflection, or a kind of apparent automaticity. As Gary explained: "You do things automatically. You respond to situations automatically" (2011). Such automaticity was not a state of affairs he found useful in making action fit with his espoused moral stance.

## Our pre-reflective relationship with the world

Understanding the existence of pre-reflection is important for seeing the difficulty of change. Taylor's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on the extent of our unrealised and embodied involvement in the world is that. "[W]e are only able to form conceptual beliefs guided by our surroundings because we live in a preconceptual engagement with those surroundings" (Taylor as cited in Carmen & Hansen, 2005, p.38). So our consciousness of relationship with our world, i.e. with the pupils we teach, the colleagues we work with, in the way we walk around the school and sit in meetings, is one in which we have already reacted pre-reflectively.

What must be remembered here is that others have also already reacted to us—"they would have gone away" (Gary, 2011). Our understanding of our environment is deeply rooted in, and dependent on, that preconceptual response. Pre-reflection is the pre-verbalised awareness, pre-conscious and, importantly, embodied coping that are fundamental to existing. The coping can go wrong, but it is not beyond interrogation—if it were, we would be unable to change anything about our behaviour except at the most superficial level. Interrogation involves bringing embodied aspects of our coping to consciousness and as such is a neglected part of reflection. But it is not done by introspection. We can have control over our pre-reflective coping, and it is not unnatural to do so. When we do have that control, we are "thinking in activity" (Alexander, 1985, p. 42).

If you can sort of split yourself into two; the person in the moment and the other person who is looking at that person in the moment and trying to say 'are you aware that there are other things impacting on you now over which you don't have much control, but which put you into this situation?'. And if you realised that, maybe you'd handle the situation a bit better, a bit more intellectually. (Gary, personal communication, September 20, 2011)

### Working collaboratively within a school

Attempting to work collaboratively in education in a humanistic way surely requires the individual to critically assess both institutional policy and their own response to that policy, and how they will work with other individuals within the group in implementing or in moderating that policy. In this instance I use the word "critically" synonymously with "intelligently": "Intelligence becomes ours in the degree to which we use it and accept responsibility for consequences" (Dewey, 1957, p. 287). The consequences here are how we manifest to others in concrete, objective terms and this necessarily includes our preconceptual reaction to them—"I felt myself becoming warm and heated" (Gary, 2011)—and theirs to ours—"they think they are interacting with you in a friendly way" (Gary, 2011).

Not only did Dewey position us as a psycho-physical unity, but he, prior to Merleau-Ponty, doubted our complete separation from the world. He interprets objectivity as an interactive, on-going process that enables us to read what we could call the "sub-text" of self that might otherwise be either invisible, or not quite the way we think it is, when it comes into action in the objective world, the world of others with whom we have relationships. Dewey calls objectivity "inclusive interaction" (1929, p.259 where perceiving being and perceived thing are not separate but are dynamically interrelated.

The last sections have focused very much on the individual and interaction with others, and it is perhaps possible to argue that that is all that social reality consists in. But in an educational context, we deal with consequences of politics

and policy (Ball, 2013). Because of that, and because Freire, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty all emphasise our being in the world, not simply our being, I want to make the explicit link here to the ethical self in a wider context.

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed Freire (1972) points to the need for a "deepened consciousness" of situation leading to the realisation that social reality is "susceptible of transformation" (p. 73). In a practical theory of critically reflexive responsibility, this realisation that things could be different is fundamental. Collaborating individuals must make that step of realisation, and by applying the concept of reflexivity accept that they are operating as social agents "within the space of a game," (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 62) the rules of which have been pre-determined by other players than themselves, but require them (the individual) to put those rules into practice. The rules are generally, in education, little more than "validated opinion" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 72). In our critically reflexive scenario, the individual educational agent must take responsibility for implementing or operating a policy within their working environment. They must decide whether the initiative presented to them is in the best interest of humanisation, if such is their particular ethical stance. And it is here that knowing what that stance is and deciding whether it is possible to act consistently with it becomes important.

# Humanisation or perpetuation of the old cycle?

Whether we are in the classroom, or involved with school management or leadership, does our objective presence, our manner of acting, belie any espoused commitment to movement towards humanisation, or is it in fact contributing to a cycle of domination and subjection (Chomsky & Macedo, 2000)? There is a clear theoretical framework already laid down for such commitment. Where transformation is the aim (in the humanist sense described by Freire in the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) no change of the world of social relations can take place separately from the transformation of individuals, particularly those on the "dispensing" side of the education system. Freire sees the danger of the use of the "educated class" by any existing hegemony, as non-critical intellectuals become "indispensable in the mind-control endeavour and schools play an important role in this process" (Chomsky & Macedo, 2000, p. 25). Educationalists who do not operate critical reflexion can be compared to Freire's uncritical intellectuals, or to the "oppressed", who suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. (Freire, 1972, p. 32)

This is the kind of situation where the teacher, wearing the cloak of authority, and forgetting how to relate, one human being to another, which Gary sought to avoid:

sometimes they think they are interacting with you in a friendly way and you take it wrongly because you don't understand where they are coming from and then tell them off when they have tried in their own way to be friendly towards you. (Gary, personal communication, September 20, 2011)

The argument can be summarised like this: in order to be an educational practitioner with a consistent moral stance in an educational community, critical gaze must be turned on self as well as world. If change is expected of both self and world, as opposed to simply the latter, it can be termed "reflexive". When consciously conceived and operated, such reflexivity is critical; it does not automatically accept the status quo and it admits of the engaged, embodied nature of self. In order to be critically reflexive, the practitioner must engage as honestly as they can with their own behaviour, conceptual and pre-conceptual and often habitual. They must be able to at least recognise that others have conceptual and preconceptual habitual behaviour. The behaviour is not simply intellectual, but is thought of in terms of a psycho-physical objective self in the real world of an educational institution. Self-awareness must involve a realisation that we are physical objects always positioned in the world. What is sought is the catching sight of self as it manifests in thought and action. In catching sight of this manifesting self, there is the opportunity to check what we think we are doing with what we are actually doing and thus allow the new to enter and personal change to happen. Change involves not looking inward as such, but assessing thinking through action in the world. Recognising pre-conceptual automaticity for what it is gives us the choice to act in accordance with our chosen ethical position.

Being critically reflexive therefore does not imply self-interested introspection, but involves looking to our own judgement and behaviour as well as to the nature of the systems in our particular institution. If we wish to take a liberal humanist position, with a careful eye to avoiding domination by others by not giving permission to them to dominate, we must also allow for the possibility of our own tendency to dominate and perpetuate the cycle which we ostensibly condemn.

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