Teaching Critical Thinking

Practical Wisdom

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Teaching: Introduction

When I began my schooling in the all-black, segregated schools of Kentucky in the fifties I was lucky to be taught by African American teachers who were genuinely concerned that I, along with all their other pupils, acquired a “good education.” To those teachers, a “good education” was not just one that would give us knowledge and prepare us for a vocation, it was also an education that would encourage an ongoing commitment to social justice, particularly to the struggle for racial equality. It was their strong belief that a teacher must always be humane. Their embodiment of both a superior intellect and an ethical morality shaped my sense of school as a place where the longing to know could be nurtured and grow. Teachers in our segregated schools expected us to attend college. They were infused with the spirit of W.E.B. DuBois, who proclaimed when writing about higher learning for black folk in 1933,

> We hold the possible future in our hands but not by wish and will, only by thought, plan, knowledge and organization. If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dream will come and not otherwise.

We were taught that education was the surest route to freedom. The teachers were there to guide us, and show us the way to freedom.

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When I made my way to college, I was truly astonished to find teachers who appeared to derive their primary pleasure in the classroom by exercising their authoritarian power over my fellow students, crushing our spirits, and dehumanizing our minds and bodies. I had chosen to attend Stanford University, a predominantly white college (primarily because the financial aid packages were better than those offered by black institutions), but I never once considered what it would be like to study with teachers who were racist. Even though I had attended a high school with outspokenly racist teachers who were contemptuous and unkind, I had romanticized college. I believed it would be a paradise of learning where we would all be so busy studying that we'd never have time for the petty things of this world, especially not racism.

We need more autobiographical accounts of the first generation of black students to enter predominantly white schools, colleges, and universities. Imagine what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human. Imagine what it is like to be taught by teachers who do believe that they are racially superior, and who feel that they should not have to lower themselves by teaching students whom they really believe are incapable of learning.

Usually, we knew which white professors overtly hated us, and we stayed away from their classes unless they were absolutely required. Since most of us came to college in the wake of a powerful anti-racist civil rights struggle, we knew we would find allies in the struggle, and we did. Remarkably, the outspoken sexism of my undergraduate male professors was

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even harsher than their covert racism.

Going to school in this strange new climate of racial change was both exhilarating and frightening. In those days, almost everyone was proclaiming the rise of a new age of equality and democratic education, but in reality the old hierarchies of race, class, and gender remained intact. And newly constructed rituals ensured they would be maintained. Trying to negotiate these two worlds—the one where we were free to study and learn like everyone else and the one where we were continually made aware that we were not like everyone else—made me a bit schizophrenic. I wanted to learn and I enjoyed learning, but I feared most of my teachers.

I went to college to become a teacher. Yet I had no desire to teach. I wanted to be a writer. I soon learned that working menial jobs for long hours did not a writer make and came to accept that teaching was the best profession a writer could have. By the time I finished graduate school I had encountered all types of teachers. Even though progressive teachers who educated for the practice of freedom were the exception, their presence inspired me. I knew that I wanted to follow their example and become a teacher who would help students become self-directed learners. That is the kind of teacher I became, influenced by the progressive women and men (black and white) who had shown me again and again, from grade school on into college, the power of knowledge. These teachers showed me that one could choose to educate for the practice of freedom.

Nurturing the self-development and self-actualization of students in the classroom, I soon learned to love teaching. I

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loved the students. I loved the classroom. I also found it profoundly disturbing that many of the abuses of power that I had experienced during my education were still commonplace, and I wanted to write about it.

When I first told my longtime editor at Routledge, Bill Germano, that I wanted to write a book of essays about teaching, he expressed concern. He said then that there may not be an audience for such a book, calling attention to the fact that I was not an education professor; my published work to date had focused on feminist theory and cultural criticism. I explained that in this new book I wanted to explore the connections between engaged pedagogy and issues of race, gender, and class, as well as the impact of Paulo Freire's work on my thinking. As he listened to me, which he always did, Germano was persuaded. And *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* was published to much success in 1994.

Ten years later, I published *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, the "sequel" to *Teaching to Transgress* that continued to explore issues of engaged pedagogy. In the introduction, titled "Teaching and Living in Hope," I talk about the fact that the first teaching book reached an amazingly diverse audience, that it created a space for me to dialogue with teachers and students about education. I shared:

> In these past years I have spent more time teaching teachers and students about teaching than I have spent in the usual English Department, Feminist Studies, or African-American Studies classroom. It was not simply the power of *Teaching to Transgress* that opened up these new spaces for dialogue. It was also that as I went out into the public world I endeavored

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> to bring as a teacher, passion, skill, and absolute grace to the art of teaching: It was clear to audiences that I practiced what I preached. That union of theory and praxis was a dynamic example for teachers seeking practical wisdom.

In the past twenty-plus years I have been asked to address many topics that were not covered specifically in the first two teaching books. I have been asked to comment on various issues, to answer questions that were deemed especially pressing for an individual teacher.

In this final book of the teaching trilogy, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, I have not followed the previous two books' pattern of writing a collection of essays. Instead, in this book, I have highlighted issues and concerns that teachers and students placed before me and responded to each issue with a short commentary that I've called a "teaching." The thirty-two teachings discuss a wide range of issues, some simple and others complex. Issues of race, sex, and class are addressed from diverse standpoints. I was excited to write these short commentaries; there are so many worthwhile issues surrounding teaching that are worth considering, even if they do not invite a longer essay. A black woman professor wanted me to address how she could maintain authority in the classroom without being viewed through the lens of racialized sexist stereotypes as an "angry black woman." One teacher wanted me to talk about tears in the classroom, while another wanted me to talk about humor. It was particularly challenging to address the question of whether we can learn from thinkers and writers who are racist and sexist. The power of story, the essential role of conversation in the learning process, and the place of imagination in the

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classroom are just a few of the other subjects addressed in this collection.

All of the topics discussed in this book emerge from my conversations with teachers and students. While the topics are not connected by a central theme, they all emerge from our collective desire to understand how to make the classroom a place of fierce engagement and intense learning.

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Teaching 1
Critical Thinking

On the cover of my memoir *Bone Black* there is a snapshot of me taken when I was three or four. I am holding a toy made in vacation Bible school, a book shaped like a dove. I often joke that this picture could be called "a portrait of the intellectual as a young girl"—my version of *The Thinker*. The girl in the snapshot is looking intensely at the object in her hands; her brow a study in intense concentration. Staring at this picture, I can see her thinking. I can see her mind at work.

Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators—demanding to know the who, what, when, where, and why of life. Searching for answers, they learn almost instinctively how to think.

Sadly, children's passion for thinking often ends when they

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encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind. Whether in homes with parents who teach via a model of discipline and punish that it is better to choose obedience over self-awareness and self-determination, or in schools where independent thinking is not acceptable behavior, most children in our nation learn to suppress the memory of thinking as a passionate, pleasurable activity.

By the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking. Those students who do not dread thinking often come to classes assuming that thinking will not be necessary, that all they will need to do is consume information and regurgitate it at the appropriate moments. In traditional higher education settings, students find themselves yet again in a world where independent thinking is not encouraged. Fortunately, there are some classrooms in which individual professors aim to educate as the practice of freedom. In these settings, thinking, and most especially critical thinking, is what matters.

Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself. Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically. In his essay “Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?” Daniel Willingham says critical thinking

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consists

> of seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.

In simpler terms, critical thinking involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things—finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child—and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most. Educator Dennis Rader, author of *Teaching Redefined*, considers the capacity to determine "what is significant" central to the process of critical thinking. In their book *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder define critical thinking as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it." They further define critical thinking as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self corrective." Thinking about thinking, or mindful thinking about ideas, is a necessary component of critical thinking. Paul and Elder remind us:

> Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and point of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.

Critical thinking is an interactive process, one that demands

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participation on the part of teacher and students alike.

All of these definitions encompass the understanding that critical thinking requires discernment. It is a way of approaching ideas that aims to understand core, underlying truths, not simply that superficial truth that may be most obviously visible. One of the reasons deconstruction became such a rage in academic circles is that it urged people to think long, hard, and critically; to unpack; to move beneath the surface; to work for knowledge. While many critical thinkers may find intellectual or academic fulfillment doing this work, that does not mean that students have universally and unequivocally embraced learning to think critically.

In fact, most students resist the critical thinking process; they are more comfortable with learning that allows them to remain passive. Critical thinking requires all participants in the classroom process to be engaged. Professors who work diligently to teach critical thinking often become discouraged when students resist. Yet when the student does learn the skill of critical thinking (and it is usually the few and not the many who do learn) it is a truly rewarding experience for both parties. When I teach students to be critical thinkers, I hope to share by my example the pleasure of working with ideas, of thinking as an action.

Keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking. I often talk about radical openness because it became clear to me, after years in academic settings, that it was far too easy to become attached to and protective of one's viewpoint, and to rule out other perspectives. So much academic training

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nature of democracy. Nowadays, most students simply assume that living in a democratic society is their birthright; they do not believe they must work to maintain democracy. They may not even associate democracy with the ideal of equality. In their minds, the enemies of democracy are always and only some foreign "other" waiting to attack and destroy democratic life. They do not read the American thinkers, past and present, who teach us the meaning of democracy. They do not read John Dewey. They do not know his powerful declaration that "democracy has to be born anew in each generation, and education is its midwife." Highlighting the need to align schooling with democratic values, James Beane and Michael Apple paraphrase John Dewey in their book *Democratic Schools* to explain, "If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led." When disenfranchised groups of American citizens worked to change all educational institutions so that everyone would have equal access—black people/people of color and white females, along with allies in struggle—there was a dynamic national discourse about democratic values. In keeping with that discourse, educators were deemed crucial conveyers of democratic ideals. At the core of these ideals was a profound, ongoing commitment to social justice.

Many of those allies in struggle were white males who, by virtue of circumstance and privilege, had been at the forefront of efforts to make education a site where democratic ideals would always be realized. Yet, many of these proponents of democratic values were divided. In theory, they expressed the belief that

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everyone should have the right to learn and yet, in their practice, they helped maintain hierarchies within educational institutions wherein privileged groups were given advantage. Like Thomas Jefferson, who contributed much to the rise of democracy, their minds were divided. Although he could proclaim "educate and inform the mass of people," in much of his work Jefferson's split mind was revealed. On one hand he could speak and write eloquently about the need to uphold the spirit of democracy and of equality, and on the other hand he could own slaves and deny black people basic human rights. Despite these contradictions, Jefferson did not waver in his belief that embracing change was crucial to the "progress of the human mind." He wrote, "As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times." Certainly, as the critique of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values gained momentum, schooling and education began to undergo profound and radical changes.

Conservative dominator culture responded to these changes by attacking public policies like affirmative action that had provided the means by which institutions of higher learning could include disenfranchised groups. Consequently, the doors to education that had opened and allowed the disenfranchised to enter were closing. The subsequent rise of private schools undermined public schools, while teaching for testing reinforced discrimination and exclusion, and segregation on the basis of race and class has quickly become an accepted norm. On all fronts, funding for education has been cut. Progressive

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professors who had once pushed for radical change were simply bought off. High status and high salaries motivated them to join the very system they had once worked so hard to dismantle.

By the 1990s, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and Cultural Studies were all revamped so that they were no longer progressive locations within educational systems from which a public discourse about freedom and democracy could be vocalized. They were, for the most part, deradicalized. And in those locations where deradicalization did not take place, they were ghettoized, deemed a suitable playground for students who wanted to assume a radical persona. Today, professors who refuse to comply with deradicalization are often marginalized or even encouraged to leave academia. Those of us who stay, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, see first-hand the ways that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business and corporate capitalism encourage students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success. Such thinking makes acquiring information more important than gaining knowledge or learning how to think critically.

The principle of equality, which is at the core of democratic values, has very little meaning in a world in which a global oligarchy is taking over. Using the threat of terrorist attack to convince citizens that free speech and protest place our nation at risk, governments globally are integrating fascist policies that undermine democracy on all fronts. Explaining that "capitalism no longer needs democracy" in his powerful polemic *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*, Herve Kempf contends:

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> Thus, democracy has become antithetical to the objectives the oligarchy seeks: democracy favors opposition to unwarranted privileges; it feeds doubts about illegitimate powers; it pushes for the rational examination of decisions. It is consequently more dangerous all the time during a period when the harmful tendencies of capitalism are becoming more obvious.

Now more than ever before in our nation, we need educators to make schools places where the conditions for democratic consciousness can be established and flourish.

Educational systems have been the primary place in our nation where free speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions are valued in theory and practice. In her thoughtful consideration of this subject, *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy: On Being an American Citizen*, Susan Griffin reminds us that "to keep the spirit of democracy alive requires a continual revolution." In her profound meditation on democracy, *The Healing of America*, Marianne Williamson emphasizes ways that the democratic principle of unity in diversity remains the foundation of democratic values:

> There are people in America who overemphasize our unity yet fail to appreciate the importance of our diversity, just as there are those who emphasize our diversity yet fail to appreciate the importance of our unity. It is imperative that we honor both. It is our unity and our diversity that matter, and their relationship to each other reflects a philosophical and political truth outside of which we cannot thrive.

Griffin echoes these sentiments: "In a democracy many

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different points of view about every possible subject will be expressed, and almost all of them must be tolerated. This is one reason why democratic societies are usually pluralistic." The future of democratic education will be determined by the extent to which democratic values can triumph over the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education.

Progressive educators continue to honor education as the practice of freedom because we understand that democracy thrives in an environment where learning is valued, where the ability to think is the mark of responsible citizenship, where free speech and the will to dissent is accepted and encouraged. Griffin contends that,

> those who would contribute to democratic consciousness would transgress the boundaries of prejudice and assumption is consistent with the deep desire for free speech and thought, not just as tools in the eternal battles for political power that occur in every era but from an even more fundamental democratic impulse, the desire to enlarge consciousness.

Democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy works, that it is the foundation of all genuine teaching and learning.

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visit them in hospitals and sick rooms, where they have tried to lay their shame to rest through suicide. At such times we feel the depths of their despairing lost sense of self. More often than not, professors deny the enormous power we wield in relation to a student's self-esteem. Teachers who acknowledge this power are far more likely to use it in the service of raising a student's consciousness so that they may realize their potential. It is the teacher who must first recognize the hidden treasure in the student with wounded self-esteem. Working to uncover that treasure is the mutual process that prepares the ground for a student to build healthy self-esteem.

I have witnessed the process of psychological growth in black students who learn to decolonize their minds, leaving behind the residue of racist indoctrination that gave them no firm ground on which to construct a positive sense of self and identity. In my early years of university teaching, I, too, was somewhat brainwashed and felt that my central role was to impart knowledge, that it was not my role to be a therapist. Yet it soon became apparent to me that if lack of self-esteem served as a barrier to students' learning, then I would have to help them to work at removing that barrier so that the information and knowledge I hoped to share could be constructively grasped by them.

I became accepting of the need to assist my students with their psychological growth when I began to see this work as enriching my teaching rather than diminishing it. This became all the more apparent to me when I encountered highly intelligent students performing poorly because of their low self-esteem. If I wanted

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