

Are we promoting critical autonomous thinking?

# **Are we promoting critical autonomous thinking? Observation of conversational genres can help us answer that question – but it is not enough**

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Abstract

This work is based on the assumption that if the classroom is a space which triggers the appearance of manifestations of critical autonomous thinking, then it will promote that kind of thinking by the students, in other contexts. But what counts as a manifestation of critical autonomous thinking and how can we observe them? As Robert Young's work on indoctrination and conversational genres seemed a promising conceptual framework for understanding what goes on in the classroom in this respect, we took it as a starting point for exploring answers to this question. Our exploration both through fieldwork and theoretical reflection, led us to some conclusions, among which are 1) the postulation of new genres which refine the conceptual categories originally formulated by Young; 2) the finding that analysis of function is not enough, requiring also a *contents* dimension with which one can analyse what critical autonomous thinking is promoted *about*, in particular classroom situations; and 3) the finding that classroom situations are frequently more contradictory and fragmented than presupposed by the very idea of genre.

*Keywords:* Intellectual autonomy; Critical autonomous thinking; Classroom conversation; Genres; Critical discourse analysis

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

There have been various ways of understanding what criticality and critical thinking are about, and their relation with autonomy. Notable differences in this respect exist among the logic-oriented critical thinking movement, the more modernist, and the more postmodernist approaches proposed in the frame of radical pedagogy and postradical pedagogies. Nevertheless, it can be argued that regardless of one's stance, the *criticality* idea is inevitably entwined with that of *autonomy*, even if only in a partial, fragmented, or relative way (Mejía, 2002). Criticality will presumably help us to not be compelled to believing and acting in particular ways defined not by ourselves but by others – or by no one in particular – by helping us become aware of different possible ways there are for believing and acting. This paper is

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about the promotion of critical autonomous thinking; and a general assumption underlying it, is that one of the main purposes of education is the development of critical autonomous persons. It reports on a theoretical exploration of what is involved in the observation and analysis of the ways in which critical autonomous thinking is or is not promoted in the classroom. This exploration has not been of the purely armchair-reflection type, though; it has involved observation and analysis of actual pedagogical practices by teachers.

### 1.1 CLASSROOM OBSERVATION IN SEARCH OF MANIFESTATIONS OF CRITICAL AUTONOMOUS THINKING

How can we tell whether in our classrooms we are actually promoting critical autonomous thinking? There are many possible answers to this question, but perhaps the first one that comes to mind—especially to research-oriented persons—involves the construction of tests that can reflect the level of development of critical autonomous thinking in students, individually. This option, however, would certainly be a suitable one if critical autonomous thinking could be reduced to a skill or set of skills. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that critical thinking also involves attitudes or dispositions (Siegel, 1988); in other words, it is not only a matter of *being able* to do something, but to actually do it in appropriate situations. This involvement of attitudes adds to the level of difficulty of constructing tests for measuring levels of critical autonomous thinking (Norris and Ennis, 1989). Furthermore, and if we follow the proponents of radical pedagogy at least since Paulo Freire, we would have to say that the very idea of a critical attitude points to more general *ways of being and of understanding oneself and one's relation to the world one lives in*, which manifest in actions performed in everyday situations. Given this, it could then be proposed to observe students as they act in their everyday situations outside of the classroom. However, this may also be difficult given the resources required for doing it. Moreover, if one supports, as we do, the idea that teachers must be *constantly* alert to the possible impacts of their pedagogical actions on students, then the resources needed make this second option simply impracticable, at least for this purpose.

A third alternative is to turn to look directly at what is going on in our classrooms, everyday, looking for students' manifestations of critical autonomous thinking as well as of its opposite. According to the discussion by Norris and Ennis on various means of evaluation of critical thinking (1989), this option is a good one as regards the assessment of dispositions, although it may require many hours of observation. However, if one thinks of this assessment as one which should take place constantly and be carried out by teachers themselves, instead of a one-off action possibly done by someone external to the pedagogical process, then the criticism of impracticality dissolves<sup>1</sup>. In the literature, however, there are not many reports of classroom observation in search of manifestations of critical autonomous thinking or of its opposite. Notable exceptions are found in the works of Young (1992) and Gore (1995), though from very

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical exploration reported in this paper was actually a part of a broader action research project aimed at the development by some teachers of competency for the promotion of critical autonomous thinking, supported by their observation of their own classroom situations (Molina, 2004). This project involved the confrontation of causal questions about what works in promoting critical autonomous thinking; of normative questions about what education ought to aim at in this respect; and of analytical questions about what its promotion is about (Mejía, 2005a). Nevertheless, this paper's scope only covers the discussion of the latter (analytical) type of questions.

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different theoretical backgrounds.

Now, would this be an assessment of impact or of process? Well, perhaps both at the same time. It is an assessment of impact insofar as it is in some sense a product – occurrence of manifestations of critical autonomous thinking – which would be observed. In this case, we would be talking about critical autonomous thinking in respect of the topics that are being studied. But it is mainly an assessment of process insofar as manifestations of critical autonomous thinking taking place inside the classroom, are not the same as those manifestations taking place outside the classroom (Mejía, 2005b). Whatever happens inside, can only be thought of as either promoting or thwarting the appearance of critical autonomous thinking outside. The presupposition, of course, is that if a student produces her/himself manifestations of critical autonomous thinking in classroom situations, or if there are such manifestations produced by others, then it will be more likely that s/he will participate in other situations, in other contexts, also with such manifestations.

### **1.2 ROBERT YOUNG'S CONVERSATIONAL GENRES AS A CONCEPTUAL TOOL FOR CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS**

Of course, in order to observe manifestations of critical autonomous thinking in the classroom, or of its opposite, one has to first have an idea of what such manifestations look like. As a starting point, we refused to take critical thinking in the manner of the critical thinking movement; that is, as essentially related to the assessment of arguments by means of a good use of logic. As argued by various authors, this is a very limited notion of assessment, and implies a very rationalistic view of the human act of knowing and believing (Paul, 1992; Duhan Kaplan, 1994; Giroux, 1994; Mejía, 2001 and 2002). Furthermore, we needed a systemic approach that could help us make sense of the various possible manifestations of critical autonomous thinking by various students *in context*, to not see them as isolated or independent from each other. For these reasons, we chose as a starting point Robert Young's work, which combines a kind of discourse analysis based on functional systemic linguistics, with a Habermasian critical theory of communication (Young, 1990 and 1992). As will be explained in detail below, the conversational genres are possible ways in which classroom conversation can proceed, functionally speaking, between teacher and students. Therefore, it sees both the teacher's and the students' actions as part of a conversation, and not as isolated. However, as this was only a starting point, the question remains of to what extent Young's conversational genres can actually do the job of providing the conceptual categories required for the observation and analysis of the appearance of manifestations of critical autonomous thinking in the classroom. In this paper we will address precisely this question. However, the significance of the discussion does not lie only on the particular and specialised contributions to Young's approach, but more broadly on its contributions to the conceptualisation of critical autonomous thinking and its promotion in education.

### **1.3 THIS PAPER**

Having introduced in section 1 the context of the discussion, section 2 explains Robert Young's work on the classroom genres. In section 3 we go on to address a number of problematic issues that arise out of the use of Young's genres to analyse the promotion of critical autonomous

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thinking. Finally, section 4 summarises the argument and discusses what lies ahead.

### 2. YOUNG'S CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONAL GENRES

The main concept involved in our approach to observing critical autonomous thinking in the classroom is that of *genre*, a short for *generic structure*, as developed within functional systemic linguistics (Halliday and Hassan, 1985; Unsworth, 2000), and its development by Robert Young, suited to classroom conversations (1990 and 1992). For him, genres are situated conversational structures that can be defined as "sets of structured expectations about speaking roles and how speech should proceed in given situations" (1992, p.66). These expectations effectively exert pressure to act in certain ways, and thus produce what has been called *control by structure*. Moreover, they can be internalised in such a way that they become invisible for teacher and students.

Young presents a typology of classroom genres, which is relevant for his preoccupation with indoctrination. This typology is based on a distinction between the *method classroom* and the *discourse classroom*, which is in turn based on Habermas' distinction between *communicative* and *strategic* action (Habermas, 1984). Communicative action is one whose aim is understanding; strategic action, on the contrary, seeks to achieve some specific result through dialogue, such as persuasion, deception, or indoctrination. But this is not only a matter of the teacher's intentions, as students also play an active role in indoctrination. Indeed, it is a matter of conversational structure that should be looked at in a systemic way: teacher's and students' usually unconscious expectations about their conversations will influence their actions, which in turn will influence the others' expectations and actions. In these intertwined ways of expecting and acting some systemic purpose emerges, which does not necessarily correspond to the participants' stated intentions.

To tell which genres are present in a particular classroom, the researcher must basically analyse the *function* of the questions made by the teacher. Since two questions formulated by a teacher, very similar in appearance, may be functionally very different, Young proposes to study the *sequences* of conversational moves made by teacher and students.

The questions in a sequence are not randomly juxtaposed (...) Question sequences reflect a goal-seeking process or strategy. (...) It is only against this strategy, which is often unstated or unannounced, that we can determine the function of individual questions. The interspersed elements, as well as the teacher's reactions to pupil answers, can often provide data on the basis of which we can draw a feasible inference concerning this unstated strategy and the role in it of other elements such as informative moves or directions. (Young, 1992, p.96)

Based on this idea, and on the observation that teachers ask the vast majority of the questions in the classroom, Young goes on to formulate four classroom genres firstly differentiated in terms of whether the person who asks the questions (the teacher) expects the students to know the answer or not, and of whether the students expect the teacher to know the answer or not. He

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named them *What Do Pupils Know* (WDPK), *Guess What Teacher Thinks* (GWTT), *Finding out* (FO), and *Discourse or Discursive Education* (DE)<sup>2</sup>. In terms of purpose, WDPK is evaluative, for in it the teacher asks the students questions in order to assess whether they know the correct answer to them. The teacher here is the one who judges the rightness of the answers, producing intellectual dependence on her/his authority. GWTT has a guessing purpose, insofar as there is a predefined correct answer the teacher knows, and the students are supposed to “discover” it “by themselves”, by advancing their guesses based on the hints given by the teacher. But it is only an illusion that they have constructed their own ideas, for they have only participated in a guessing game of giving answers that should be satisfactory to the teacher’s eyes. *Finding Out*, appears mainly when the teacher needs to know something about the pupils, possibly for administrative reasons. However, it does not provide elements for analysing the promotion of critical autonomous thinking, and thus we will not use it here. DE is the genre that would most closely approach Habermas’ Ideal Speech Situation. Its purpose is inquiry and understanding, for arriving at a predefined answer known or established by the teacher is not as important as the inquiry process by means of which students assess different possible options and tease out their own answers. Now, it is important to restate that “purpose” does not refer here to “teacher’s intention”, and that a genre is not a pedagogical methodology or strategy. For one thing, the appearance of a genre in an actual classroom situation depends on what both the teacher and the students do, and therefore is not a description of the teacher’s actions. Additionally, for a genre to be configured it is not necessary that teacher and students consciously intend to achieve the purpose associated to it; it is only needed that their actions be aligned in that direction.

Now, according to Young’s discussion on critique and on Habermas’ ideal speech situation, DE would be the only genre in which critical autonomous thinking is actively promoted and indoctrination does not take place. This is so because this genre is the only one that genuinely provides a space for students to advance their own positions, to be in a situation where they have to assess them critically and revise them in the light of their own as well as other participants’ questions, and to assess and criticise other positions, including the teacher’s.

These genres can be further specified in terms of a number of rather observable characteristics that can then be used to observe and analyse classroom situations. Given that each of them relates in a different to the promotion of critical autonomous thinking, a teacher (or an external observer) could now try to determine whether or not the aspects that define the various genres are present in their classrooms, and thus establish by this means the extent to which her/his classes are promoting critical autonomous thinking.

### **3. TO WHAT EXTENT YOUNG’S GENRES PROVIDE THE CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS REQUIRED TO ANALYSING THE PROMOTION OF CRITICAL AUTONOMOUS THINKING?**

The title to this section is the main question that we intend to address in this paper. So far, we

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<sup>2</sup> Other authors such as Christie (2000) have postulated different classroom genres, reflecting a different researcher’s purpose. In terms of the analysis of promotion of critical autonomous thinking, we think Young’s are better suited.

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have attempted to show why Young's genres seemed promising in this respect, and to justify our decision to choose it as a starting point for our exploration. It is now time to discuss a number of its aspects, in order to both understand in more detail what the promotion of critical autonomous thinking is about, and open the way for improvements on our observation and analysis of manifestations of it in the classroom. We will now examine the appropriateness in this respect of Young's theory of classroom conversational genres, in terms of the following aspects: 1) the delimitation of a conversation as a unit of observation (can the short sequences of conversational moves that define genres be ascribed with the property of promoting critical autonomous thinking or its opposite?), 2) the completeness of Young's four postulated genres (are there only four classroom genres?), 3) the conformity of actual classroom situations to genres (are actual classroom situations as coherent as is presupposed by the notion of genre?) , 4) the idealness of discursive education (DE) (can critical autonomous thinking be promoted in genres other than DE? does DE always promote it?), 5) the visibility of the actors' intentions presupposed by the idea of a genre (are there relevant events happening "behind one's back" that a genre analysis might fail to detect?), and 6) the focus of genres on the form of the conversation (should the contents of conversations also be looked at?). Our arguments are illustrated in some cases with examples taken from our observation of classroom situations of four courses in a public school in Bogotá (Colombia): 6<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish, 8<sup>th</sup> grade Maths, 8<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade Philosophy. They were part of our broader project's fieldwork (Molina, 2004).

### 3.1 THE UNIT OF OBSERVATION: WHAT IS A CONVERSATION?

Young's indications for recognising genres take the unit of observation to be sequences of linguistic moves that exhibit some closure around a purpose. These sequences may then be repeated, forming larger conversations. For practical reasons, we consider that when analysing a conversation it is usually useful to take the unit of analysis as being a topic developed during one activity. This generally –though not always– allows for the aforementioned closure to appear, and furthermore for the possibility to identify elements of promotion or inhibition of critical autonomous thinking. Nevertheless, it must be kept in sight that the full understanding of that particular conversation also requires taking into account conversations which occur during other activities and even other sessions. That is, if one takes into consideration things which occur outside the analysed conversation, the original judgement about whether and how critical autonomous thinking was being promoted, can be reassessed. For instance, in 10<sup>th</sup> grade Philosophy, sometimes a long segment of a session would be devoted to group work on a set of questions that the students were asked to discuss. During this activity, various genres appeared, in some cases DE. However, in the following sessions the same topic would be treated by the teacher in a way that guided the partial conclusions reached by the students, to his own preferred conclusion, in the manner of GWTT. This way, what appeared as a manifestation of DE when looked at as a conversation on its own, actually had just an introductory and perhaps legitimating function for a GWTT, when considering the larger conversation it was part of. Although we recognise that these various levels are all relevant for the purpose of analysing promotion of critical autonomous thinking, it is still a question for us how to address the connection between them.

A second point concerning the unit of observation refers to the fact that conversations are not always between the teacher and the students but can also be between the students and a

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textbook, other students, and so on. Young's genres do not take this into account, but it would be naïve to think that by removing the teacher's authority to declare what is true or not, one is automatically promoting intellectual autonomy. The teacher's authority might simply be replaced with, for instance, the textbook's.

### 3.2 THE EXISTENCE OF GENRES OTHER THAN THOSE POSTULATED BY YOUNG

Although Young draws his four postulated genres from a 2 by 2 matrix that leaves no theoretical room for new ones (1992, pp.100-105), at the same time he was explicit about the fact that they are by no means the only possible ones (p.98). Our observation confirms this latter point. We came across two new kinds of structures not well represented by Young's genres. First, we found a new genre similar in appearance to GWTT – though only in appearance – but in which the guessing attitude is replaced by a reasoning process that still attempts to reach a predefined conclusion known as correct by the teacher. We have named it *Reason Towards the Teacher's Answer* (RTTA). The hints in GWTT are replaced in RTTA by questions that touch on reasons that constitute a justification for the conclusion. The fact that students need to reason suggests that they assume some responsibility for the conclusion, and therefore critical autonomous thinking may be being promoted. However, depending on how completely the various aspects and dimensions relevant to the argument are explored in the conversation, it can be said that there are various possible levels and dimensions of the promotion of critical autonomous thinking. In any case, however, the fact that the connections that guide the formulation of the questions are made by the teacher is something that reduces the possibilities of manifestations of critical autonomous thinking on the part of students. Now, when particular aspects, perspectives, or assumptions, are systematically ignored, then the imposition that occurs will be subtler and harder to reveal, due to the fact that the reasoning involved may give the illusion of a complete process.

The second finding concerns a genre we observed repeatedly, which we called *Participatory Conversation* (PC). The teacher's aim in this genre seems to be to get the students to participate in discussion, regardless of the quality of the interventions. Accordingly, the students' main interest becomes to show the teacher that they are actively engaged in the conversation. However, they hardly take into consideration what the others have said, and as a result the conversation takes the form of isolated monologues. For example, in the Spanish 6th grade class that the following transcription was part of, the objective behind the teacher's questions was not to assess the students' knowledge, but to find out what they thought about a certain topic and to encourage them to talk in public. She did not give final answers or restrict the students' expressions, and she posed some questions so that they related what they saw in class with their own lives. These kinds of conversations usually ended when the time ran out, but could stay open during subsequent classes. In the following example, the students are discussing the movie *Shrek*. (In the following transcriptions S stands for "student", and T for "teacher". All the conversations were in Spanish, and the translation is ours.)

- S1 I think that the movie should have a better sound, because I couldn't hear well, and that the characters should be funnier.  
T Funnier... Did you find them boring?  
S1 No, but they weren't very real, they had problems but weren't funny.  
T Okay.

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- S2 The dragon... No, Shrek shouldn't be an ogre and instead of being spelled by a witch he should've become a prince with the princess' kiss.
- T And why?
- S2 Because changing a princess for an ogre's something very ugly. I would've liked him to stay with the princess.
- T So, fat people shouldn't live?
- S2 It's not that, but it would've been better if he stayed with the princess.
- T Jessica, where's Jessica? In this crowd... What meaning did you find in the movie?
- S3 I didn't like it when the prince wanted to marry the princess out of interest.
- T And if you were the princess, would you marry out of interest?
- E3 No, because that would be unfair.
- T Unfair? Why?
- E3 Because it would be taking advantage of the other person.
- T Taking advantage of someone else? And not taking advantage of you?
- S3 Yes, that too.

Let us notice that some issues are polemic, and the teacher may ask questions for the students to more critically think about their initial ideas, even if poorly formulated. ("So, fat people shouldn't live?", "And not taking advantage of you?"). Nevertheless, in the end they never get far in the exploration of the issues. In respect of a similar situation, another teacher we worked with stated that at this stage of the children's development he felt he should give them confidence, and promote their participation without interfering. However, by not exposing his own points of view or promoting the questioning of the students' arguments, he might be fostering the taking of other texts and sources either as unquestionable authorities, or as subjective opinions that cannot be improved.

We will now present a more extended table of genres that includes the new ones that we now postulate, with a brief description of some elements that characterise each of them. The first column describes the general attitude that underlies the whole conversation. The end point marks the moment when the conversation should end, for it has reached its desired state. The roles are the activities carried out by both teacher and students. The basic sequence is the basic nucleus of conversational actions by participants, that needs to be present if an occurrence of the genre is identified. Many repetitions and variations to this nucleus can occur, though. The final column provides additional comments that characterise some of the elements from the previous columns.



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GENRE	END POINT	ROLES	BASIC SEQUENCE	COMMENTS
<b>WHAT DO PUPILS KNOW (WDPK)</b>	Teacher obtains a correct diagnosis of students' present knowledge	Teacher assesses whether students are able to reproduce a subject. Students try to show they are able to.	T: Asks question S: Answers T: Judges rightness of answer	Answers to questions are known by the teacher. Questions must not reveal the right answers to them.
<b>GUESS WHAT TEACHER THINKS (GWTT)</b>	Students reach a certain conclusion declared by the teacher (at least) as correct	Teacher gives hints that take students from where they are to the right answer at the end. Students guess what the teacher wants to hear.	T: Asks question S: Answers T: Reformulates answer and/or gives hint S: Uses judgment or hint to provide new answer T: Approves final answer	Teacher knows right answers to her/his questions. Hints do not involve argumentation. There is the illusion that the students reached the conclusion by themselves. Questions reveal their right answers, but in a non-obvious way.
<b>REASON TOWARDS THE TEACHER'S ANSWER (RTTA)</b>	Students reach a certain conclusion declared by the teacher (at least) as correct	Teacher asks questions that take students from where they are to the right answer at the end. Students reason their answers.	T: Asks question S: Answers T: Asks new question that makes student think why her/his answer was wrong, or that connects a new aspect required to get to the final answer S: Answers T: Approves final answer	Teacher knows right answers to her/his questions. Students reach the conclusion by means of their own reasoning, but based on the questions and connections made by the teacher.
<b>DISCURSIVE EDUCATION (DE)</b>	Participants reach their conclusions after submitting their ideas to critical scrutiny; everyone is satisfied with her/his conclusions.	Teacher prompts students to examine ideas, and participate in the inquiry. Students examine ideas put forward by themselves and others, and advance positions.	P1: Asks question P2: Answers P3: Answers P4: Judges/ compares answers P5: Answers All: Approve final answer	Both teacher and students ask questions and advance positions. New answers or questions take into account what has been previously said. Although the teacher may be the one who asks the question at the beginning, this is not necessarily the case.
<b>PARTICIPATIVE CONVERSATION (PC)</b>	All students have given their opinions about a subject	Teacher assigns turns and prompts participation. Students give their opinions.	T: Asks question S1: Gives opinion T: Prompts S2 to participate S2: Gives opinion	Answers are not judged or examined, and no connections are established between those given by different participants.

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### 3.3 GENRES AS PURE DESCRIPTIONS OF CLASSROOM SITUATIONS

Halliday, just like Young, seems to think that typical genres will normally be found in actual situations in a pure way; that is, that one can have a pure description of what goes on in a situation by describing the one genre that underlies the participants' behaviours for a given period of time (Halliday and Hassan, 1985, pp.9-10). According to him, there are variations within any genre, but even these cannot go out of certain boundaries of what is allowed. However, we found a series of situations in which this ideal may have been breached: In them, the teacher seemed to favour one genre, whereas the students seemed to want to engage in another. For instance, we encountered situations in which even though the teacher tried to get the students to revise their arguments and to bring their own experiences into the conversation, favouring a DE, the students seemed to assume that their role was to reproduce what they had read in a book, favouring a WDPK. We also encountered situations of resistance. For instance, in one class of 10<sup>th</sup> grade Philosophy, the teacher gave the students some instructions for group work, with some questions that, under close analysis, showed there was a predefined conclusion that the students were expected to reach. However, during the group work, it became clear that some students had refused to be led to that conclusion, and defended alternative positions. The result in all these cases may be that the conversation does not flow easily, for participants' expectations about each other may not coincide with the expectations about themselves that they themselves have. In terms of Young's definition of a genre, in these cases "expectations about speaking roles and how speech should proceed in given situations" are not coherently structured, and thus a proper systemic purpose does not emerge for the conversation.

This is very interesting, for Young's theory characterizes genres as structures which control the way class talk occurs, and which make clear to participants their role in the conversation. This is reflected in Young's idea of *control by structure*. However, the two situations depicted above can be seen as showing in general that at least some situations may be difficult to be described with the coherency presupposed by the notion of genre. In this sense, genres should not always be taken as pure descriptions of actual classroom situations. Although we will not discuss the implications here, we think they should be seen as *ideal types*, in Weber's sense, or perhaps more radically as *holons*, as postulated in the soft systems thinking tradition (Checkland, 1995).

A different but related point constitutes a word of caution regarding classroom observation. In other cases we found that while some students acted in ways that seemed to lead to some genre's purpose, other students seemed to engage in a different genre – during the same class. This point supports our idea that the same pedagogical activities do not trigger the same reactions in all students, and that therefore the teacher must be constantly alert so s/he can adjust her/his pedagogical designs. But, moreover, this point suggests that the whole group of participants in a classroom setting should not always be regarded as a unified collective whose interactions constitute a single conversation. This conclusion applies both to cases in which students have and have not been formally divided into smaller working groups.

### 3.4 INCLUDING ELEMENTS OF DE IN OTHER GENRES CAN PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING

Young's argument suggests that it is only with DE that indoctrination can be avoided, and critical thinking promoted. Given that during the other genres imposition of knowledge is

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present either through expecting the children to reproduce knowledge previously created by someone else, as in WDPK, or to arrive at a specific answer not through a process of analytical enquiring but by guessing a correct answer predefined by the teacher, as in GWTT, Young's conclusion is apparently correct. Nevertheless, genres do not appear in classroom conversations in a pure way; it should rather be said that usually there is a particular genre which predominates in a specific conversation, at the same time that elements from other genres appear. When these aspects can be said to "belong" to a DE, we believe that even if the predominant genre is not promoting intellectual autonomy, these particular elements are. In this sense, we encountered cases in which the principal genre was WDPK, but in which at the same time the students had to assess and revise their arguments in the light of the teacher's questions. It was reproductive questioning, because the students were supposed to reproduce knowledge and demonstrate abilities learned in previous lessons. But it was not only certain particular information the students were supposed to reproduce, but an understanding of a subject at a deeper level. The teacher's questions would serve to diagnose whether the students knew the right answers, *as the result of a good understanding of the subject*. This understanding involved reasoning. The following transcription from an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Maths class is an example:

T Now, construct a rectangle with an area of 24 square units, and a perimeter of 28 units. Draw all the rectangles you can, that meet those conditions... Would you please switch places with her, and if you can't see it's your problem; this is an individual exercise.

[The student walks to the blackboard and draws a rectangle of 8 units by 4.]

S1 That is wrong because it doesn't add up.

S2 That adds 24.

S1 Exactly.

S2 But they are not square units.

S3 It doesn't add up.

T Let's look at the square that he drew. Does it meet the given conditions of a perimeter of 28 units? Does it? What is the area? It should have 24 square units, what is the area?

S1 32.

T Does it meet the condition?

S Nooo.

S4 That one does. [Points at another rectangle of 12 by 2 that another student has drawn.]

T That one does? It has 2 sides of 12?

S3 24.

T And 2 and 2?

S5 4.

T So the perimeter is?

S3 28.

Here, there is not much space for proper critique, as knowledge is presented as unquestionable and the students are constantly evaluated on the basis of whether they can reproduce it. Nevertheless, they display an inquiring attitude, revising their arguments and those of others, and posing questions in order to better understand what was being taught. In some sense, it can be said that this example of WDPK, which may have imposed knowledge through the reproduction of predefined knowledge, but which also promoted critical autonomous thinking

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through the existence of some elements that more naturally belong to DE. For instance, a pure WDPK would simply evaluate the students' present state of knowledge. However, in this case the questioning process itself, which still has an evaluative purpose, is also a means for critical learning.

### 3.5 PLAY-ACTING

In some cases, perhaps due to the authority image that the teacher represents, the students stated publicly not what they thought, but what they believed the teacher expected them to. This suggests that one cannot conclude how autonomous or critical the students are from only observing them interact with the teacher. In one 10<sup>th</sup> grade Philosophy class, for example, we observed this difference between "public" and "private" behaviour. The teacher had given the students a set of questions that addressed topics covered by him in previous lessons, as well as by the textbook. The conversation thus could be more or less described as WDPK. However, when the students worked in groups and were not being observed by the teacher, there was critical questioning and, moreover, they refused to take for granted the "right" answers that the teacher had previously given them. Nevertheless, when again in front of the teacher, in the session's answer sharing phase, the students turned to reproducing what the teacher had previously said.

This finding shows that the fact that the teacher is a figure of authority may produce certain distortions on the way s/he can observe what goes on in the classroom. This, however, should not be taken as something that renders useless the teacher's use of the conceptual tool. We instead think this means that a teacher may have to try to be less of a distorting element if s/he wants to determine the extent to which s/he is or is not promoting critical autonomous thinking.

### 3.6 ISSUES OF STRUCTURE AND ISSUES OF CONTENT

Young focuses on conversational structures, setting aside issues of content of class talk. By doing this, he assumes that it is possible to have a conversational structure which is critical (critical discourse), independently of its contents. The following quote provides the rationale for this assumption:

I would prefer (...) critique to be something that does not spring from externally applying a supposedly non-ideological system of ideas to criticise speech habits. I want to avoid the problem of justification that arises when I seek to claim that my system of ideas about men and women, children and teachers is non-ideological and so permits me to point out ideologies from 'on high'. If I can find a basis for critique that is both content-free (...) and internal to language, I will have avoided this burden. (1992, p.72)

In doing this, he assumes that issues of indoctrination and promotion of critical thinking can be reduced to issues about how participants in a conversation interact with each other in a formal sense. But this reduction is not possible, since knowledge is imposed both through structure and content, just as the promotion of critical autonomous thinking can be done by establishing a certain conversational structure, or making evident what (content) is being imposed. This way,

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there may be a conversation matching the DE structure, but still fail to address relevant issues about the topic being discussed, that could potentially help teacher and students see other possible alternative conclusions. DE can promote critical autonomous thinking, *but only about those issues and assumptions that are effectively examined in the conversations*. The opposite relation can also be established: Some knowledge imposition or indoctrination, by the teacher, may introduce into a conversation conceptual elements without which the students could have never gotten to question relevant aspects of the topic under discussion (Mejía, 2004). This would be an illustration of the fact that power is both productive and repressive at the same time: it both opens up and closes off possibilities (Giroux, 1997). Therefore, achieving DE may not be enough as an objective: *What* critical thinking is promoted about must also be taken into account. Now, we agree with Young about the fact that any pointing out of ideologies from a system of ideas cannot be neutral, or non-ideological. This means that the analysis of contents of a conversation, by one observer, may not coincide with that by another, and that these differences can be explained ideologically. But still one should not renounce this examination of contents, for otherwise any analysis will be necessarily incomplete. We will come back to this issue in the concluding section.

To minimally illustrate this point, in a class of 8th grade Social Studies the teacher was promoting a critical attitude by teaching students how to participate in public life, and stand up for their rights. He did this through assignments that concerned the ways of making claims to companies that provide basic public services. He took as examples cases that occur on a daily basis. Some knowledge imposition on his part may have taken place, given that an analysis of the conversational structure showed that WDPK was present during activities in which the teacher assessed whether the students could reproduce and “properly” use the concepts of *respectful request* and *correct procedure*. However, at the same time he may have helped prevent other forms of imposition from external actors such as those companies. Indeed, this same type of dual situation may be present in those classes guided by radical pedagogy principles, and perhaps even in post-radical pedagogies as well (Mejía, 2004).

An important reflection comes from this example: The kind of control by structure that Young emphasises seems to only address in a direct way critical autonomous thinking on the part of students, *towards the teacher and what s/he asserts*. But, as the proponents of other critical approaches in education know well, an education for critical autonomous thinking must also address what is said by actors and sources outside the classroom.

## 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have explored some issues concerning the observation of manifestations and promotion of critical autonomous thinking in the classroom. We have done so by means of a discussion of the potential of Young’s classroom conversational genres as a conceptual tool for that purpose. However, while some of our arguments are very specific about the theory of classroom genres, some others impinge directly on aspects that affect the whole range of available approaches concerned with the promotion of critical autonomous thinking. For instance, we think this is the case of our discussions about the units of observation, about the fragmented nature of many classroom situations, and about the insufficiency but necessity of paying attention to conversational structure. But it has to be said also that our interest has been mostly practical: We

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have addressed these issues that we found were important for observation and analysis of classroom situations, but never had the intention of providing a comprehensive and fully coherent revision of theories such as functional systemic linguistics, or critical theory. Whatever such implications of the work presented in this paper, they were not within the reach intended for this paper and shall be elaborated elsewhere.

Still within the practical scope of this paper, however, are a number of unresolved issues that we would like to briefly formulate in what follows, in question form. These issues are derived directly from some of the findings of our exploration, presented in section 3 of this paper.

- Given that the classroom genres only cover the structural dimension of conversations, and that dimension is not enough, how can an examination of contents be included in the analysis, coherently with what there already is about structure? Will the concept of *genre* still be adequate to account for the contents dimension? If so, what new conceptual categories must be included in the analysis? If not, what kind of new conceptual categories for analysis will need to be constructed? Can content and structure be integrated in a single kind of analysis? (See section 3.6.)
- How can we properly conceptualise *conversation* as an object of study, given the various relevant possible time horizons? What is the connection between those various levels? How to deal with the contradictions that appear when conversations in these different levels are analysed? (See section 3.1.)
- Are the genres identified so far, enough to make sense of classroom situations in different contexts? Will there be a need to provide a generic tool with which classroom observers (e.g. teachers) can construct new genres in a freer manner to adapt to their observed situations? What kind of flexibility is needed for them to do so? (See sections 3.2 and 3.3.)
- How to deal with the fact that a lot of what goes on in the classroom may escape the teacher's view, and still have a conceptual framework with which meaningful classroom observations can be produced? (See section 3.5.)

These questions – which lie on the borderline that separates theory from practice – point out a path for future research. However, important as they may be, they are only a part of a large set of topics still not properly developed, around the problem of helping our students become critical autonomous thinkers. A lot of work is also needed in other areas such as teacher formation, pedagogical strategies, and the ethics of teaching for critical autonomous thinking. The task is great, but it concerns nothing more and nothing less than one of the central aims of education.

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