

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES ABOUT THE PROMOTION OF CRITICAL THINKING IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some issues concerning the promotion of critical thinking, from a philosophical perspective. The argument is based on the idea that the specific manifestations of critical thinking one produces about some issue depend on one's knowledge resources, as well as on one's emotional attitudes towards that issue. From this idea, and with an emphasis different from that suggested by the ideas of general skills and critical spirit, it is argued that critical thinking about the set of issues, dimensions and perspectives that are not actually critically addressed in the classroom, in terms of both knowledge and emotions about them, is not being directly promoted, and there is no guarantee that students will be critical about them in the future. Educators interested in the promotion of critical thinking, therefore, should take the responsibility for defining what crucial issues, dimensions and perspectives will, as a minimum, need to be properly addressed. Lastly, it is argued that assessing the promotion of critical thinking in particular pedagogical situations should involve at least analysis of a structural dimension – to distinguish acts of critical thinking from others – and of a contents dimension – to identify what critical thinking is being promoted about.

KEYWORDS

critical thinking, critical thinking assessment, critical thinking promotion, conversational structure, conversational contents

INTRODUCTION

The question of how to promote critical thinking in education can be taken as an empirical question. Roughly, one has to start with some detailed definition of critical thinking. The next step consists in deriving from that definition, research instruments that can measure to what extent a student has developed critical thinking. Then, one implements pedagogical strategies that seem plausible as candidates, and uses the research instruments as well as other methods for research design and analysis, in order to obtain information as to how effective those pedagogical strategies were.

This approach to the question presupposes that critical thinking is something that can be developed by students, and that will have some stability afterwards. This is the case, for instance, of the currently widely spread view of critical thinking as a combination of sets of skills and dispositions. For this idea to make sense, at the same time one would presume that once our students leave our classes, or our educational centres, the critical thinking they will have developed will be manifested in their production of, so to speak, *critical acts*, or *manifestations of critical thinking*, in the appropriate circumstances. (These two expressions refer to production and assessments of ideas, and ultimately to the taking of decisions about what to believe and how to act, carried out in a certain way that we call *critical*.) All in all, this implies a certain way of leading their lives.

However, as I have argued elsewhere, a close analysis shows that the knowledge resources one has in relation to any issue, argument, theory, social practice, or whatever is the object of critical analysis, determine one's capacity for the production of critical acts in respect of it. In particular, what possible assumptions one is able to reveal, and what possible implications one is able to derive from some object of critical analysis, concretely depend on one's belief system about it, that in this case takes the role of *knowledge resource*. Now, given that in the context of pedagogical activities and their restrictions there is only opportunity to address certain limited issues, to examine certain limited aspects of them, from certain limited perspectives, and to question certain limited assumptions, I will argue in this paper that this constitutes a reason for believing that it is not correct to talk about direct promotion of critical thinking in general, but about those issues, aspects, perspectives, and assumptions, dealt with in the classroom. In other words, there is no guarantee even that all the important issues in the students' lives will be addressed critically by them; unless they have actually been properly dealt with in the classroom. They simply may not have the knowledge resources necessary to do so.

I will also construct a similar though less developed argument in terms of the emotional investment and involvement of students with certain issues, dimensions, perspectives, and so on. At least in some cases, in order for critical thinking to be developed by a student, there is a need for a process of self-reflection that addresses how s/he is emotionally involved with whatever is in question. If what is involved in these processes varies much from one issue, dimension or perspective to the next, then it becomes difficult to talk about a general critical attitude, or a general critical spirit.

From these conclusions, I will argue that an analysis of the promotion of critical thinking in an actual pedagogical situation must pay attention to manifestations of critical thinking by the students, which must be characterised *at least* in terms of both conversational contents and conversational structure. Taking a very broad notion of conversation, this implies that on the one hand one should look at what is *and what is not* being said; what perspectives are *or are not* being addressed; what assumptions are *or are*

not being revealed, and examined; and so on. And on the other hand, one should look at who asks the questions, who answers them, how, what conversational function these questions and answers have, and so on.

1. THE DEPENDENCE OF ASSUMPTION IDENTIFICATION ON KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES

At least in some accounts, critical thinking is said to involve going beyond the apparent and obvious meanings, to reveal and examine what lies behind ideas, arguments, ideologies, or even social practices. A central concept for this role of thinking is, surely, that of *assumption*. There has been some discussion in the literature concerning what is an assumption, and whether assumptions can be systematically unearthed. Although for some authors assumptions refer to particular logical connections between parts of an argument, here I will want to allow for this concept to cover also ideas that underlie a whole theory, ideology, or worldview. One first point to notice here consists in the fact that when the object of analysis is as small as a few sentences constituting an argument, logical tools such as those used by the critical thinking movement can be particularly useful. However, when the object of analysis is of a larger kind, such as social discourses, social practices, etc., logical tools are simply not enough; and other tools – sociological, political, etc. – start to take over.

In previous work I have developed an account of the identification of assumptions, based on Donald Davidson's holistic ideas about interpretation (Mejía, 2001, and 2002). As regards the present paper, one important conclusion from that work is that assumptions should not be considered so much atomic properties of propositions, or of arguments, but anatomic properties of them that appear only in relation to a belief system held by the critical person who analyses them.

Very briefly, the particular way in which assumption identification depends on knowledge resources held by the critical person can be seen in this: When a speaker makes an assertion, s/he is somehow choosing one among a set of possibilities. For instance, in most cases if s/he says "this object is green", s/he is at the same time rejecting other options such as "this object is blue", and so on. And an interpreter hearing the sentence will usually understand it in those terms. However, the interpreter may also want to question the very range of possibilities that the speaker has chosen. For example, s/he may want to ask the speaker something like "does it have a colour?", or "does the colour belong to it?" These questions are actually questioning an assumption present in the original sentence; namely, that the object does have a colour. However, for them to make sense and not be empty questions, the interpreter must have in mind, even if only in a very incomplete way, possibilities different from those implied by the original sentence; that is, s/he must have in mind alternatives to the assumption that was revealed. These alternatives are part of the belief system held by the critical

person doing the analysis, and may perfectly vary from one person to the next. When this happens, there may well be different assumptions revealed, each one based on a different aspect, or examined from a different perspective.

I take it that the proponents of radical pedagogy have really taken seriously the need to address those issues that, in their opinion, are central to their students' lives. In this, they have not simply taught them abstract techniques or concepts, to apply them to arguments of any sort in a rather academic exercise. Instead, they have attempted to give their students knowledge resources that allow for the questioning of certain central assumptions present in dominant discourses, typically in the social, political, and economic domains. Of course, there is the unavoidable question of whether they have made the right judgements regarding what is and what is not central to their students' lives, and of whether or not those knowledge resources they have given them represent a particular ideological view of reality (see for instance Taylor, 1993; Brady, 1994; Weiler, 1996; and Mejía, 2004). The point I want to emphasise, however, is that specific issues, aspects, dimensions, assumptions, discourses, etc., that are not specifically critically examined in the classroom, may never be examined by the students on their own, because doing so requires knowledge resources that they may possibly not count on. And let us notice that a set of general critical thinking skills cannot provide a guarantee for this to happen, because such skills cannot replace the knowledge resources required. It simply may never happen to occur to the students that there was something to examine there in the first place. One does not know what one does not know.

2. DIFFICULTIES FOR A GENERALISED CRITICAL ATTITUDE

Again taking an insight from the work in radical and post-radical pedagogies, it can be argued that the emotional plays a very important part in the production and assessment of ideas. In many cases, and more particularly in those in which one has some emotional involvement, critical reflection should include self-reflection on the various ways in which the issues in question affect one's identity, social position, or whatever is the case, and on how that may affect one's ideas and positions about them.

Apart from this, about any particular subject there are very many aspects or dimensions whose critical examination one could undertake, and for which one already has knowledge resources and intellectual capacity. Aspects or dimensions about which one does not *feel* that one should be more questioning than one actually is, and about which there are no classroom situations or activities that may lead one (as a student) to feel that way, may never be part of one's actual concerns, and therefore one may never exercise any critical thinking about it. With this I mean to argue that in education one not only acquires knowledge resources, but also learns to feel that some assumptions and issues are worth examining and some are not. Now, this may well be an inevitable

consequence of the fact that even within the range of issues and aspects that one is intellectually capable of critically questioning, our mortal condition does not allow us for the time necessary to examine all.

The conclusion is similar to that of section 1, but this time in respect of the work with the emotional instead of the acquisition of knowledge resources. The ways in which one is emotionally involved with various different issues varies greatly from one to the next. The reflection that should be involved may be of such a kind that work on the emotional about one issue may not help much with reflection on the emotional about another.

3. THE PROMOTION OF CRITICAL THINKING

If my conclusions from the previous sections are right, then it is perhaps more correct not to talk about someone's level of critical thinking in general – or of her/his level of critical spirit, or of her/his level of critical thinking skills – but instead to talk about her/his critical thinking towards some particular issues, along some particular dimensions, from some particular perspectives, and so on. And, moreover, it is perhaps more correct to point at the assumptions, dimensions, perspectives, and so on, that s/he is *not* critical about. Of course, in everyday language it still makes some sense to talk about someone's level of critical thinking in general, or to compare two persons in that respect. However, in the context of a more strict philosophical context, that way of talking seems too rough.

Additionally, it should then be concluded that the promotion of critical thinking in some pedagogical situation takes place, in a direct way, only about the issues, along the dimensions, and from the perspectives, that actually appear in the manifestations of critical thinking by the students in that situation. This certainly does not mean to say that the students will only learn to produce, or will produce in the future after they leave our educational centres, the critical acts that they have already produced in the educational context. New critical acts will be produced by them in the future, involving different issues, dimensions and perspectives. But the farther they stand in relation to those actually and properly addressed in the classroom, the less direct the promotion can be said to have been; and, for the same reasons, the weaker the guarantee that the students will actually produce those critical acts.

The argument above suggests that there is a responsibility that needs to be taken by educators, of establishing some minimum issues, aspects and perspectives that the promotion of critical thinking in the classroom will necessarily have to involve. This decision is, of course, of an ethical nature, and is no free of risks. In fact, I take it that the excesses of radical pedagogy have to do directly with the decisions taken by radical educators in this respect (see also Ellsworth, 1989). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the fact of having to take a decision may involve in itself some degree of

knowledge imposition on students (Mejía, 2004). Nevertheless, the decision is unavoidable not only ethically, but also logically. Whatever actually ends up happening in the classroom in a sense corresponds to a decision, albeit one that may not have been taken with full awareness of its consequences and implications. If we do not take the decision, then it will be taken for us.

Now, according to the discussion in the previous sections, implementing the decision needs to involve at least two interrelated tasks that need to be assumed by the teacher: For these pedagogical situations to be effective, at least two tasks seem to be necessary: 1) Providing students with knowledge resources related to the minimum issues, dimensions and perspectives, that allow for critical thinking involving them; and 2) helping students work with their own emotional attitudes towards them. These two tasks are simply those ones that appear as a consequence of the analysis above; certainly I do not intend to say that they are the only ones.

4. ASSESSING THE PROMOTION OF CRITICAL THINKING

According to the above discussion, an assessment of the promotion of critical thinking in a particular pedagogical setting suggests the examination of the manifestations of critical thinking produced by the students in the classroom context. The question will be if there are such manifestations, and about what particular issues, dimensions, or perspectives. This means that the empirical-research picture presented in the opening paragraph of this paper can still be used; it simply should redefine the object of study to account for the issues discussed above. Belief systems held by the students as well as their emotional attitudes would perhaps be defining of variables that could be part of this research.

In what follows I will argue that pedagogical situations should be analysed in at least two dimensions, in order to study the production of critical acts by the students: A dimension of conversational structure, and a dimension of conversational contents. While the first analysis attempts to distinguish what can from what cannot be considered a critical act, the second one attempts to describe what contents – expressed in terms of issues, dimensions or perspectives– were or were not involved, and therefore also whether they were or were not promoted and how.

The dimension of conversational structure concerns in what ways a student does or does not participate in the production of critical acts, and the function that her/his participation has in the context of a particular conversation. I use the term “conversation” in a very broad sense, in such a way that, for example, an essay written by a student can be taken as a move in the context of a larger conversation between the essay’s author and, possibly, a teacher, various texts’ authors, and other students. The “function” denotes the role some conversational move takes in respect of the larger

conversation it is part of. For example, in some conversation a teacher's judgements about the students' answers may take the role of *hints* about where students should aim to get at. And, correspondingly, the students' answers may take the role of *guesses* at what the teacher has in mind. What is important for the analysis is that the function is determinant for categorising whether or not something said, or written, etc. by a student can be considered a critical act. In this way, one same set of sentences may or may not be a manifestation of critical thinking depending on what function it has within the conversation it is part of. An example of a rather classical approach to conversational structure is Robert Young's (1990). Unfortunately it is designed to only address oral classroom conversations held between teacher and students.

The second dimension (contents) concerns what is and what is not being said or examined. It includes analysing what assumptions are or are not being made explicit, or examined.

And a final point: Interestingly, analysing the promotion of critical thinking in an actual educational situation presents at least a problem concerning the position of the one who assesses. Given that it involves observing what is being said, or examined, *as well as what is not* being said, or examined, in the pedagogical conversations, it involves critical thinking itself. This is due to the fact that the person who analyses this promotion or lack of it – it may well be the teacher, or some external researcher – would be involved in the same kind of analysis that one would expect of any conversation participant who exercises critical thinking. Identifying what it is that has not been examined by someone, constitutes a first step for examining it, and therefore for critical thinking.

FINAL REMARKS

I am not sure about whether the idea that critical thinking consists of skills and dispositions should be dropped altogether. I certainly do not want to commit to a clear position about that at this stage. What my analysis intends to show is that at least it should be taken much more carefully than it has possibly been so far. In particular, I think that educators should be alert to, and reject, the idea that just because they are promoting some kind of critical thinking in their classrooms, they are greatly improving the chances of their students taking control of their own lives. What they talk about is also of tremendous importance, and a careful decision has to be taken about what issues should be ethically compelling to develop critical thinking about, and in terms of what aspects or dimensions, and from what perspectives, etc. This decision is all part of the tension and of the search for a balance between the students' and the teacher's ideas about what is important or essential for life.

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