Adelaide Leticia Saad Lukowiecki
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CRITICAL REFLECTION:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

The objective of this essay is to show how a critical reflection can contribute to the development of my work as an ODE consultant. The essay consists of two parts: the first, is an explanation of the term Critical Reflection and the second explains how my professional work is affected by the critical reflection.

1. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CRITICAL REFLECTION?

To show my understanding of critical reflection and its implication for learning, I selected a few concepts from various authors as cited by Hawkridge and George (2000).

Schön(1987) says "Competent professional often have the capacity to generate new knowing-in-action through reflection-in-action undertaken in the indeterminate zones of practice. The sources of knowing-in-action include this reflection-in-action and are not limited to research produced by university-based professional schools". According to him, reflection-in-action is that practised by people during ill-defined situations and complex problems which require a original, creative and intuitive answers. Eraut (1995) shows us that Schön describes three features of reflection-in-action: (a) it is in some measure conscious; (b) it has a critical function; and; (c) it gives rise to on-the-spot experiment. To Eraut these feature represent the past, present and future aspects of the reflective process. However, he says, "In general, Schön fails to appreciate the importance of the time variable in understanding professional behaviour. When time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited. In these circumstances, reflection is best seen as metacognitive process in which the practitioner is alerted to a problem, rapidly reads the situation, decides what to do and proceeds in a state of continuing alertness... Extending the period for reflection ... is likely to result in the reflection assuming a more deliberative character, with time to consciously explore a range of possible options or even to consult with other people. Thus, the more reflection assumes a critical function, the less appropriate it becomes to describe it as being in the action".

From a selection of three kinds of adults learning introduced by Mezirow (1985): instrumental learning, dialogic learning and self-reflective learning, the last two deal with critical reflection. "Dialogic learning is the exploration of different views through dialogue (in its various modes), between individuals. The various perspectives that

exist are necessarily located within it and constructed out of the subjective experience of those involved. The existence of different views is not necessarily an indicator that some are 'right' and others are 'wrong', but it involves a wider and deeper consideration of the issues and the contexts from which they emanate". "Self-reflective learning is a deep personal dimension that results in a radical change in the way individuals understand the world and their own place within it. It is through the critical processes referred to in dialogic learning that this is often triggered. By critically examining their own assumptions and habitual ways of thinking and acting, individuals may consciously begin to reform their own fundamental views and way of life."

According to Evans and Nation (1989), "critical reflection is a view about nature of social life and how it is constituted. In essence, this view embodies recognition that culture and social structure as constructed through history by the people who share and occupy them and that people are themselves shaped as social beings by the cultural and social conditions, which surround them... Critical reflection is the process through which human beings use their analytical powers to assess elements of their lives against their explanatory frameworks. Critical reflection is a precursor to change because, through the recognition of human agency, it encourages people to seek improvement to their lives in their own terms."

According to George (2000), "the critical reflective approach is the socially responsible way to proceed. Although this may be valid for any professional field, it is especially important for the Education professionals. An educator is an agent in the processes of social and cultural transmission. How he/she understands the processes will, to a significant extent, assist or hinder in this more equitable reordering...While there are many valid ways to understand the world, those in education are in a particularly powerful position to deny or ignore particular perspectives. The implications of these are far greater than just a difference of opinion. They are fundamentally concerned with justice."

Based on the framework above I would say that the learning process, using a critical reflection approach, comprises the reflection we make upon our own experiences, how they are perceived by others and how we are affected by others' experiences. This is an intricate learning process, far from being precise and linear; it is much more a way of learning that employs a constant coming-and-going, dismantling truths that are crystallised and being uncomfortable in familiarity with doubt.

In the critical reflection approach, the focus lays more on the *learning* than on the *teaching*. The learners are seen, not as simple containers of knowledge previously wrapped by the teacher, but as interactors in their own learning processes. Through the discussion of the concepts and the exchange of experiences with their teacher and their peers, each learner produces a knowledge that makes sense to his/her own work and his/her own life.

2. EFFECT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MY PROFESSIONAL WORK

Frame of Reference

I am a product of a generation that for twenty years lived in a country commanded by the military. Those who followed the History of the countries that stayed under the 'protection' of a dictatorship, know that the Education was censored and that the students had access only to the knowledge that would serve the interests of the power in force. Under these circumstances we learned to see Education as a mere transmission of contents; to see the teacher as 'the only one to know' and the learner as a spectator. Moreover, we came to believe that 'what' and 'how' knowledge that was transmitted to us was the only factual truth.

My professional practice as a consultant in the education and training fields, includes activities such as: to assist in the implementation of Distance Education and training systems; to be an instructional designer for distance courses/programs; to monitor the creation/production of materials for distance courses/programs. Thus, I truthfully believe that a critical reflection contributes much for the improvement of my professional activities.

I will now present three different situations in which I think critical reflection was applied:

Critical Reflection and a new way of teaching

I was assisting a teacher during the preparation of his web-based course to teach Statistical Methods of Decision Support, for managers. This teacher used to give classes for post graduation students that already had a prior knowledge of Statistics. Throughout the many meetings we had about the course material, he made use of an hermitic and profoundly technical language in the texts he had written. Apart from that, he did not allow any opportunity for the students to interact with the material given. He insisted that technical content should be taught that way, and that the mathematical principles are indisputable. I presented an argument to demonstrate that I was not suggesting any kind of changing on 'what' he was teaching, but of 'how' he was doing so. I was trying to demonstrate that at that moment we had an excellent opportunity to experience a new way of teaching.

I truthfully believe that I can help teachers perform a better role as educators. I wish to show them that it is possible to substitute old practices of a mere transmission of knowledge (whose contents were organised according to their particular way of looking at the world), with practices of a more democratic and sharable form of teaching-learning. They will come to accept that this can affect, in a very positive way, the results of learning, because: (a) the knowledge and the learners experiences (specially adults), when brought to the course itself, increase their capability of absorbing what is being taught; (b) the students motivation increases when they discover how to give real

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meaning to what they are learning; (c) the contents, even the ones of technical nature, could well be doubted and discussed to examine different applications. The importance here is that each student can learn from his/her own perspective and not from the teacher's perspective; (d) the teachers also enrich their knowledge base through the exchanging of ideas with their learners.

Critical Reflection and the enclosing of the excluded

A Company that has employees all over Brazil has contracted my services. They wanted me as an instructional designer of a course for new employees. The objective was to substitute the local face to face course practiced by the manager, for a web-based program. They had the following complaints concerning the face to face course: (a) some managers not introduced the Company and the new employees learned its functioning by trial and error; (b) the manager or another colleague transmitted equivocal or incomplete information and, therefore, the new employees would commit mistakes; (c) the manager introduced his/her own workplace, disassociated from the rest of the Company. This reflected directly on the quality of the work of the recently admitted employees, resulting in loss for both: the employee, has a bad evaluation in his/her performance, and the Company has a damaging effect on its image.

From the beginning I was informed that the Company was only half served with the Internet and many employees did not have access to the computers. They expected to provide the whole Company with this technology within two years at the most. I started by saying that a web-based course only would not be sufficient to solve their problems. While a small group of privileged people would benefit from the web-based course, the majority would continue to be under-assessed and, jeopardising the Company's image. After that I tried to demonstrate that more important than utilising into a special technology was to solve the problem and this could be done by the use of several technologies and means. Finally I suggested that the same course should be delivered for all through three different media: Internet, diskette, and print.

Critical Reflection and the terms in ODE

A medium size Company, working with Information Technology, decided to increase its range of services, offering web-based courses on different subjects. They contracted me to help their teachers to create and/or adapt materials for the web environment. The technology to be used had been already selected. Although the learning environment chosen provided resources for communication, they did not want to spend money on tutors and/or staff for learner support. Their idea of Distance Education was very restricted. They believed that to provide Distance Education they would need just web technology and some contents within it.

Aside from the specific meetings with the teachers, I also suggested periodical meetings with all the people involved on the project. It was my intention to enhance the opportunity to think about the whole project and to enlarge their understanding of

Distance Education. I had two points in mind: to improve the quality of the work that was being done and to take responsibility for the use of the technologies and issues related to Distance Education.

I believe that when the people are informed and have conscience of what they are doing, they could compromise with their work, they are capable of improving it, and thus show a better final result. I also believe that, as educators, we should be alert so as to not allow the enchantment of Technology Information to diminish the benefits of Distance Education.

An indicator of the benefits of critical reflection in this case is the correct use of the terms. What was being uncritically presented as Distance Education is now commercialised under the name of 'self-learning'.

CONCLUSION

This essay seek to show what is my understanding on critical reflection, as well as, to demonstrate the important contribution that this approach has given for the improvement of my professional activities as a consultant in Education field.

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