



education review // reseñas educativas

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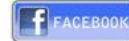
a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

April 18, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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hooks, bell. (2010) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*.
New York, London: Routledge.

Pp. 191 ISBN 9780415968201

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bell hooks's latest book, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, is a long-awaited contribution to the field of critical thinking. Ever since the publication of Robert Ennis's highly influential paper "A concept of critical thinking" (1962), the literature surrounding both the nature and the application of the subject has been dominated by an almost singular focus on mastering the skills of logic and argument analysis. Embodying such a focus, textbooks and curricular programmes that profess to teach critical thinking typically proceed via a taxonomic study of the formal structure of arguments, notions of validity, soundness, evidential strength, and an associated list of fallacies in reasoning and language such as begging the question, basing a generalization on too small a sample, attacking a strawman, etc. As this approach would have it, teaching critical thinking consists precisely in the inculcation of these skills.

Citation: Lim, Leonel. (2011 April 18) Review of *Teaching Critical Thinking* by bell hooks. *Education Review*, 14. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1069.pdf>

In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition among philosophers and educators of the inherent limits of logic and argument analysis in developing the forms of reasoning and thinking that individuals in an increasingly interconnected and differentiated world require. Nussbaum (1997, 2004) and Toulmin (2001), for example, beckon us toward a more congenial form of rationality that emphasizes contextuality, ambiguity, creativity, and a tolerance of heterogeneity over logical certitude, validity, universal principles, and polarizations typified by binary “us–them” thinking. Beyond logic and argument analysis then, we need forms of reasoning that encourage the important processes of negotiation and translation between various social, racial and gendered positions.

Teaching Critical Thinking represents the first comprehensive attempt at sketching out what such a curriculum would involve. Through a collection of thirty-two commentary chapters each documenting how the concrete issues and concerns that arise from real teaching practices actually constitute invaluable opportunities for critical thinking, hooks puts forth an understanding of the subject that radically departs from its traditional assumptions. In stark contrast to the objective, third-person writing style adopted by most books dealing with critical thinking, hooks deliberately (and characteristically) foregrounds her personal and partial voice, replete with its emotive and subjective experiences in a thoroughgoing attempt to show how real critical thinking can only develop from one’s hopes, fears, purposes, and ideals. To be sure, hooks admits at the outset that her own growth as a critical thinker was catalyzed by her experience of the forms of oppression and discrimination that challenged her as a young black female writer, and ultimately seeing through the gender, race, and class biases in dominant academic determinations of “good” writing. To her, critical thinking represents a discerning approach to knowledge that aims to move beyond the surface and the most obviously visible to an understanding of core, underlying truths, and subsequently being able to utilize that knowledge in a manner that allows one to determine what matters most. More than mere mastery of logical skills, at “[t]he heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know – to understand how life works.” (p.7)

This emphasis on the indispensability of subjective and emotive resources to the rationality apparatus is eloquently detailed throughout the book. In discussing the importance of conversation and dialogue, for example, she intimates that these allow individuals to consider and reconsider their own positions and values. Especially as they take place across “the very different locations within the hierarchies of race, class, and gender,” (p.38), dialogue and conversation potentially enable individuals to move across boundaries and address social issues from diverse and multiple perspectives, so that “[c]oncurrently, we also identify what we share that is common to us.” (p.38) Thus, instead of the highly dialectical and adversarial approach epitomized in the Socratic method, and often employed in critical thinking pedagogy, the idea of dialogue hooks appeals to creates not scepticism but trusting communities, the achievement of “solidarity across differences.” (p.40) Classroom relationships built on trust, hooks reminds us, figure centrally in any critical thinking curriculum, creating safe spaces for students to engage in open discussions over controversial and sensitive issues.

In the chapter that deals with stories, hooks points out that the sharing of narratives engages students in critical thinking by exposing them to the thick descriptions of personal realities, preparing them to hear points of view previously inconceivable. The multidimensional character of stories she claims, requires for its full comprehension a nuanced understanding of a host of personal information that pertains to the story-teller. Connecting to what Lars Lovlie (1997) has written about the “epiphanic power” of moral examples, hooks makes the point that stories provide the framework for a contextual awareness that “engage[s] the complexities of conflict and paradox.” (p.52) Far from being passive, the creative acts of deep listening establishes “a ritual of communion that opens our minds and hearts,” (p.51) helping individuals to relate to and understand each other better. Critical thinking, on this account, serves to engender a continual process of negotiation and translation between a series of individual and cultural positions.

Central to the ability to see things from perspectives other than our own is the role imagination plays in critical thinking. While most critical thinking curricula have little

to say about imagination, even denigrating it as irrational, for hooks it figures essentially to “illuminate those spaces not covered by data, facts, and proven information.” (p.59) Imagination, she notes, carries us beyond routine and static possibilities; it synthesizes things that were previously disconnected, spawning new pathways, new possibilities, hopes and dreams. Imagination, in its final moment, is pregnant with the currents of counter-hegemony. Recalling how in the 1960s African Americans began the “black is beautiful” movement to combat the continual onslaught of negative representations of blackness, hooks sees imagination as the linchpin of the traditions of critical thinking and critical theory, representing “one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited groups can and do use.” (p.61) Since what we cannot imagine we cannot bring into being, stripped of the capacity to imagine, people remain muted in their social positions, unable to challenge what she repeatedly and tirelessly excoriates as the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal biases” (p.105) of the dominant culture. It is through acts of imagination that the ideological hegemony of dominant groups may be disturbed, and the minds of marginalized and/or exploited groups decolonized.

Clearly, then, *Teaching Critical Thinking* is in many ways a reaction to the dominant ideas and ideals of the field. None of the other chapters – touching on such diverse concerns as love, hate, feminism, self-esteem, purpose, integrity, sex, spirituality, and touch – deal even remotely with the teaching of syllogisms, truth tables, conditionals, argument analysis, etc., objectives that beset the content pages of most critical thinking texts. Conceding little to the traditional emphasis on gaining facility with a set of theoretical and (putatively) universal logical skills, hooks instead proffers an alternative conception of critical thinking that both foregrounds the importance of an individual’s subjective and emotive constitution and connects these to her/his existential *raison d’être*. Thus she subtitles her book “Practical Wisdom,” insisting that “our thoughts then are not abstract meaningless currency, of use solely to those who seek to live their thinking lives in an academic environment removed from the ways and working so everyday life.” (p.186) To her, the litmus test of critical thinking lies not in the analysis of argument structures or the dissection of Venn diagrams; rather, it is

to be found in individuals' abilities to transcend race, class, and gender biases to transform their lives, moving beyond these into places of power and possibility.

While hooks's latest work rightly identifies – and seeks to address – a lacuna in the existing critical thinking literature, the implications this has for our understandings of rationality and the rational person are symptomatic of more perennial problems whose solutions may prove more elusive. Developing a form of critical thinking rooted in practical wisdom may require more than the acknowledgement and inclusion of individuals' subjective and emotive qualities, or the eschewal of the skills of logic and argument analysis in thinking curricula. At a conceptual level at least, it necessitates a reassessment of the relationship between the roles that both the former and the latter play in the rationality apparatus.

That this is not a problem unique to our present predicament allows us to benefit from the insights of Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* was thoroughly engaged in a similar project, and to whom any discussion of the notion of practical wisdom has become heavily indebted. Distinguishing between practical reason (concerned with matters of value, of what it would be most desirable to do, and of how humans live among other humans) and theoretical reason (concerned with knowledge of universal truths, of things that cannot be otherwise), his position was that practical wisdom (*phronesis*), as the ability to both decide how best to achieve a given end *and* reflect upon the desirability of that end, involves more than an either/or choice between the two. For Aristotle – as for us – what seems to be required instead is a clarification of the really complementary functions logical and desiderative thinking perform in the creation of the rational person.

Unfortunately, there is little between the covers that suggests how hooks might respond here – but fairly so, if her focus in it is to address the concrete realities of the classroom. Yet, the lack of any systematic analysis in this area inevitably renders remiss the obscurity of logic and argumentation in her proposed conception of critical thinking, especially since she explicitly connects it to Aristotelian ideals. To be sure, if hooks is seeking to develop an understanding of critical thinking that promises

liberation from oppression, she needs to remember that the instruments of logical analyses have figured powerfully in challenging dominant orders; they play an indispensable role in the formation of Gramscian organic intellectuals, proletarian mobilizations, and contemporary social movements. Indeed, the inclusion of critical thinking as an explicit educational goal itself contains progressive elements and represents a partial victory by educators lobbying for schools to go beyond a “banking” model of education.

Taking these criticisms seriously, however, hardly takes away any of the innumerable insights *Teaching Critical Thinking* affords. Widely acclaimed as one of America’s most accessible public intellectuals, hooks eloquently brings much-needed critical perspectives to a field that despite all that it stands for, must now contemplate the charge of being less than fully critical.

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About the Reviewer

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