

What Is Critically Reflective Teaching?

Every good teacher wants to change the world for the better. At a minimum we want to leave students more curious, smarter, more knowledgeable, and more skillful than before we taught them. I would also want my best teaching to help students act toward each other, and to their environment, with compassion, understanding, and fairness. When teaching works as I want it to, it creates the conditions for learning to happen. Students increase their knowledge, deepen their understanding, build new skills, broaden their perspectives, and enhance their self-confidence. They see the world in new ways and are more likely to feel ready to shape some part of it in whatever direction they desire.

Teaching can also work in the opposite way by confirming students' belief that education is a pointless and boring waste of time in which nothing of interest, relevance, or value happens. Here teaching confirms people's adherence to the status quo by strengthening whatever mechanisms of social control are in place and deepening students' apathy and conformism. So for good or ill the world is never the same after teaching.

Of course this neatly bifurcated way of presenting teaching as inherently liberating or conforming is actually far more complex in reality. I may design an exercise that I believe engages students and promotes participation, but they may experience it as a manipulative exercise of power. For example, in my first-ever

course I taught in the United States I announced at the first class that students had control over deciding what should be the course curriculum. I assumed this announcement would produce an intoxicating and welcome sense of freedom, but I was told only that they'd paid a lot of money to learn from me, the expert. As unconfident novices in a new subject area they said I was setting them up for failure by not providing sufficient guidance for their learning.

One of the hardest lessons to learn as a teacher is that the sincerity of your actions has little or no correlation with students' perceptions of your effectiveness. The cultural, psychological, cognitive, and political complexities of learning mean that teaching is never innocent. By that I mean that you can never be sure of the effect you're having on students or the meanings people take from your words and actions. Things are always more complicated than they at first appear.

For example, in my own practice I place a strong emphasis on narrative disclosure. I like to provide examples from my life that illustrate points I'm making. I do this because students across the years have told me that this captures their attention and helps them understand a new concept. But there is another side to using personal examples and that's being seen as self-obsessed. Sometimes students' evaluations of a particular class have called me *arrogant*, a term that bothers me greatly because I hate self-importance so much. When I describe a situation or incident in my own experience that I think clarifies a complicated idea or shows how a new piece of information might be applied, I assume I'm being helpful. Yet some interpret this as an unhealthy fascination with the minutiae of my own life, as borderline self-indulgence. Investigating and clarifying these kinds of complexities is what critically reflective teaching is all about.

Critically Reflective Teaching

Our actions as teachers are based on assumptions we have about how best to help students learn. These assumptions come from a

number of sources: our own experiences as learners and the way we interpret these, advice from trusted sources (usually colleagues), what generally accepted research and theory say should be happening, and how we see students responding. Sometimes these assumptions are justified and accurate, sometimes they need reframing to fit particular situations, and sometimes they're just plain wrong.

Critical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions. We all work from a set of orienting, stock assumptions that we trust to guide us through new situations. Some of these are explicit and at the forefront of our consciousness. For example, I hold two strong explicit assumptions. The first is that whenever possible teachers should initially model for students whatever it is they wish those students to do. The second is that the best teaching happens in teams. That's because team teaching enables teachers to bring different knowledge and perspectives to bear on topics and to model intellectual inquiry by asking questions, seeking to understand differences, and disagreeing respectfully.

Other assumptions are much more implicit. Implicit assumptions soak into consciousness from the professional and cultural air around you. Consequently they're often harder to identify. For example, for many years I assumed that discussion was the best teaching method to use with adults. This implicit assumption came from three sources. First, my personal experience of schooling was characterized by lectures, dictation, and top-down approaches, something I found really boring. When I became a teacher I was determined not to replicate that approach and so moved instinctively to using discussion. Second, the theory I was reading in my professional preparation drew from English and American traditions that explored education for social justice and community development. This theory, particularly that of Freire (Freire and Bergman, 2000), emphasized the importance of dialogic processes, and this deepened the commitment to discussion that arose from my bad memories of school.

Third, pretty much every one of my colleagues at the adult education center where I worked advocated discussion as the most appropriate teaching method for working with adults. Over time the assumption that discussion-based approaches were inherently superior and the most “adult” just became part of who I was. It ceased to be something I thought consciously about and just embedded itself into my habitual practice. Planning a new course? Use discussion! Setting up a staff development effort? Start with small groups!

I still argue strongly for the relevance of this approach (Brookfield and Preskill, 2016). But since I started deliberately and regularly examining my assumptions I’ve realized that sometimes it doesn’t make sense to begin a new course or professional development with a discussion. When students are complete novices, being asked to discuss new content is intimidating and often counterproductive. It’s also unfair. How can people discuss something they know nothing about? When there’s a history of institutional mistrust on the part of students, or when they’ve been burned by participating in discussions in the past, holding a discussion as the first thing you do is probably going to backfire.

Assumptions become tweaked over time, deepened in complexity. You realize that for a particular assumption to work, certain conditions need to be in place. For example, in my habitual, knee-jerk turn to discussion I’ve come to realize that discussions set up to explore contentious issues usually benefit if certain ground rules are stated early. In addition, I need to use protocols to secure everyone’s participation and to give silent processing as much prominence as verbal exchange. I also know that discussion leaders need to be open to critique and willing to reconsider their own assumptions. So my implicit assumption that discussion should be used in all situations has been refined and contextually finessed through conscious examination.

To recap, critically reflective teaching happens when we build into our practice the habit of constantly trying to identify, and

check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers. The chief reason for doing this is to help us take more informed actions so that when we do something that's intended to help students learn it actually has that effect.

Types of Assumptions

Assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that guide our actions. In many ways we *are* our assumptions. They give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. Becoming aware of our assumptions is one of the most puzzling intellectual challenges we face. It's also something we instinctively resist for fear of what we might discover. Who wants to clarify and question assumptions they've lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find out that they don't make sense?

Of course assumptions are not all of the same kind. Some are broad in scope, some specific to a particular situation. Some are explicit, some implicit. I find it useful to distinguish among three broad categories of assumptions—paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

These are the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories. Usually we don't even recognize them as assumptions, even after they've been pointed out to us. Instead we insist that they're objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts as we know them to be true. Some paradigmatic assumptions I've held at different stages of my life as a teacher are the following:

- Adults are naturally self-directed learners.
- Critical thinking is the intellectual function most characteristic of adult life.
- Good classrooms are inherently democratic.
- Education always has a political dimension.

Paradigmatic assumptions are examined critically only after a great deal of resistance, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged the consequences for our lives are explosive.

Prescriptive Assumptions

These are assumptions about what we *think* ought to be happening in a particular situation. They're the assumptions that are surfaced as we examine how we think teachers should behave, what good educational processes should look like, and what obligations students and teachers should owe to each other. Note the word *should*. A prescriptive assumption is usually stated with that word smack in the middle. Organizational mission statements and professional codes of practice are good sources for revealing prescriptive assumptions.

Some prescriptive assumptions I've held or hold are the following:

- All education should promote critical thinking.
- Classrooms should be analogs of democracy.
- Teachers should clarify expectations, objectives, and criteria of assessment as early as possible in an educational episode.

Prescriptive assumptions are often grounded in, and extensions of, our paradigmatic assumptions. For example, if you believe that adults are self-directed learners then you'll probably assume that good teachers encourage students to take control over designing, conducting, and evaluating their own learning. And, of course, you shape your teaching to accomplish this, which leads us to the third kind of assumptions—causal.

Causal Assumptions

These are assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. They are usually stated in predictive terms. Examples of causal assumptions I've held or hold are the following:

- Using learning contracts increases students' self-directedness.
- Making mistakes in front of students creates a trustful environment for learning in which students feel free to make errors with less fear of censure or embarrassment.
- Rearranging rows of chairs into circles creates a welcome environment for learning that students appreciate.
- Teaching in teams opens students to a greater breadth of perspectives than is possible in solo teaching.

Causal assumptions are the easiest to uncover. But discovering and investigating these is only the start of the reflective process. We must then try to find a way to work back to the more deeply embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions we hold.

How Do We Examine Assumptions?

The best way to unearth and scrutinize our teaching assumptions is to use four specific lenses available to us: students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, personal experiences, and theory and research. Viewing what we do through these different lenses helps us uncover when and how certain assumptions work and when distorted or incomplete assumptions need further investigation. This can't be a one-time scrutiny; it must be consistent and regular—daily, weekly, monthly. That's the discipline of critical reflection.

Students' Eyes

Seeing ourselves through students' eyes makes us more aware of the effects of our words and actions on students. This helps us clarify our assumptions and decide when they make sense and when they need to be changed or discarded. A common meta-assumption is that the meanings we ascribe to our actions are the same ones students take from them. But when we collect data from students we see the different ways they interpret what we say and do.

Colleagues' Perceptions

Inviting colleagues to watch what we do or engaging in critical conversations with them helps us to notice aspects of our practice that are usually hidden from us. As they describe their readings of, and responses to, situations that we face, we often see our practice in new ways. Colleagues can suggest perspectives we might have missed and responses to situations in which we feel clueless.

Personal Experience

Our own experiences as learners provide important clues to the kinds of classroom dynamics that hinder or further the ability to learn. This is why I feel the best use of professional development money is to fund teachers to take a course release so they can enroll as learners in courses in which they are truly novices. Becoming a student enables you to study your experiences and transfer the insights about what does, or doesn't, work to your own teaching.

Theory and Research

Theoretical and research literature can provide unexpected and illuminating interpretations of familiar as well as newly complex situations. For example, reading Michel Foucault's (1980) analysis of power shed an unexpected but very illuminating light on my work as a teacher. Practices that I thought were transparent and empowering (for example, using learning contracts or rearranging classroom furniture by putting chairs into circles) were experienced

by some as invasive and aggressive or as trying to wish away my power in a wholly unconvincing way.

So What Makes Reflection Critical?

Most reflection remains within the technical realm. We reflect about the timing of coffee breaks; how to use blackboards, flip charts, or screens; whether to ban hand-held devices from class; or the advisability of sticking rigidly to deadlines for the submission of students' assignments. We can't get through the day without making numerous technical decisions concerning timing and process. These technical decisions become critical when we start to see them in their social or political context, influenced by the structures and workings of power that exist outside the classroom.

What is it, then, that makes reflection critical? Is it just a deeper and more intense form of reflection? Not necessarily. Informed by the critical theory tradition, reflection becomes critical when it's focused on teachers understanding power and hegemony. As such, critical reflection has two distinct purposes:

Illuminating Power

Critical reflection happens when teachers uncover how educational processes and interactions are framed by wider structures of power and dominant ideology. It involves teachers questioning the assumptions they hold about the way power dynamics operate in classrooms, programs, and schools and about the justifiable exercise of teacher power.

Uncovering Hegemony

Critical reflection happens when teachers try to uncover assumptions and practices that seem to make their teaching lives easier but that actually end up working against their own best long-term interests—in other words, assumptions and practices that are hegemonic. It involves examining how to push back against this exploitation by changing structures and alerting others to its presence.

Critical Reflection as the Illumination of Power

Structures and forces present in the wider society always intrude into the classroom. Classrooms are not limpid, tranquil, reflective eddies cut off from the river of social, cultural, and political life. They are contested arenas—whirlpools containing the contradictory crosscurrents of the struggles for material advantage and ideological legitimacy that exist in the world outside.

One of my flawed assumptions as a beginning adjunct technical college teacher was that what happened in my classrooms was largely of my own making. I assumed that what I did and the way that I did it were largely under my own control. Certainly I knew there were examinations I had to prepare students for and that these would test students' knowledge and understanding of the content outlined in the syllabus. But I viewed my classroom as my own domain. I believed I could make pretty much all the decisions about the timing and flow of how we covered the required content and that the teaching methods and approaches were chosen by me.

In fact, as I moved through my first few years of adjunct work it became increasingly evident that structures and forces completely out of my control substantially shaped my supposedly independent classroom universe. First, the syllabus reigned supreme in my kingdom. Classroom discussions would start to ignite as students brought in personal experiences but I'd constantly have to cut these short in order to get back to the "official" business of covering the designated content. Sometimes when students seemed the most engaged I had to act as the enforcer of dullness, dragging them back to the study of disembodied content. I couldn't contact examiners or syllabus designers to ask them to change the tests to reflect the new areas we were exploring in class. Because exam questions and curriculum were predetermined they existed in a universe to which I had no access. The timing of examinations was set years in advance so there was no opportunity to let discussions run on. If I did that we wouldn't have the time to cover the next chunk of

curriculum properly. And that could, after all, be a chunk that was stressed in this year's examination questions.

I also became aware of wider social norms of what constituted appropriate behavior. In my first weeks of teaching I tried to get as much classroom discussion going as possible. Sometimes my students became volatile, shouting and moving around the room. I encouraged them to change groups and to get up out of their seats if they needed a break. Full-time colleagues passing by my adjunct classroom must have thought chaos or anarchy had broken out! My class was loud, looked disorganized, and definitely did not fit the norm of students sitting quietly in orderly rows while the teacher talked.

I don't want to suggest that any of my exercises or activities actually worked. I'm sure students took advantage of my inexperience and saw me as a soft touch, someone they could take liberties with. And I'm convinced there was a high degree of chaotic disorganization evident. Not surprisingly I received not-so-subtle indications from colleagues that the noise my students created was interfering with what was going on in adjoining classrooms and that I needed to have better control of what was happening in mine.

Now there was no stated policy on student behavior, no set of college guidelines on what a "proper" classroom should look like. But clearly something was in the air—a number of paradigmatic and prescriptive assumptions—that was pressuring me to make sure my classroom appeared and sounded a certain way. This "something" was dominant ideology.

Dominant Ideology

Dominant ideology is a central idea in critical theory (Brookfield, 2004), which is the chief intellectual tradition informing my own understanding of critical reflection. It refers to the set of beliefs and assumptions that are accepted as normal and commonsense ways of explaining the world. Some dominant ideologies in the

United States are those of capitalism, positivism, democracy, militarism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, and each of them contains a core premise:

Capitalism

assumes that the free manufacture and exchange of goods and services secures freedom of speech and protects individual liberty. Under capitalism entrepreneurial creativity is unleashed in ways that nurture the human spirit.

Positivism

assumes that the world and its constituent elements can be measured, assessed, and graded in quantifiable ways. The most reliable knowledge is produced through the application of the scientific method, so education should focus first and foremost on the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines. Students educated in these disciplines will help the US economy remain the most dominant.

Democracy

assumes that the most reliable and morally appropriate way to make decisions is through a majority vote. A majority of people thinking the same way about something represents the uncommon wisdom of the common people.

Militarism

assumes that, as the world's foremost superpower, the United States must maintain the strongest arsenal of weapons and personnel on the planet. Only by maintaining its superiority in armaments will the country's security be assured. Funding military, paramilitary, and other security agencies is the best way to keep America safe because the exercise of force is something that enemy states understand and respond to.

White Supremacy

assumes that because of their superior intellect and capacity to think logically and rationally, white people should naturally assume positions of power and authority. People of color are governed by emotions rather than logic and do not have the impulse control that effective leaders require. Furthermore, because whites consistently perform better in tests and examinations, their greater intelligence means we're safer if they're in control.

Patriarchy

assumes that men's superior intellect and capacity to think logically and rationally means they should naturally occupy positions of authority. Women are governed by emotions rather than logic and do not have the impulse control that effective leaders require. Feeling sways them when it comes to decision making so they can't be trusted to think rationally about the common good. Consequently men should be entrusted with decision-making power.

Ideologies such as capitalism, majority-vote democracy, and militarism are very public, praised in the media, and commonly accepted as morally desirable. Some ideologies, such as white supremacy and patriarchy, are less overtly expressed because they contradict tenets of other ideologies, such as democracy. They are expressed in jokes and whispers privately among groups of "friends," that is, people who can be trusted to think in the same way.

Critical theory views all these ideologies as mechanisms of control, designed to keep a fundamental unequal system safe from challenge. If the majority of people could see that they live in a world designed to keep a small minority in a position of overwhelming material superiority, then revolution would break out. But if you can keep people thinking that this is the natural, commonsense way the world works, then you secure their consent to this state of affairs. When dominant ideology works most effectively people

react to stock market crashes, widespread layoffs, budget cuts, and hospital and public service closures in the same way they react to weather changes. Hurricanes, ice storms, and heat waves are out of our control and to be shrugged off as best we can. Similarly, dominant ideology causes us to interpret economic and social disasters as equally unpredictable and beyond our sphere of influence.

Critically reflective teachers are on high alert for the presence of dominant ideology in educational processes and decisions. They see its influence as particularly evident in battles over curriculum where white supremacy and patriarchy come into play. Changes to tuition levels, differential funding for schools and departments, or the widespread adoption of rubrics in student assessment are analyzed in terms of the workings of capitalism and positivism.

Unearthing Power Dynamics

Critical reflection as the examination of power is not just concerned with how educational processes function as systems of social control or the way common institutional practices reflect elements of dominant ideology. Uncovering how power dynamics operate in the microcosm of classroom and staff room interactions is just as important.

Many teachers who work in a critically reflective way identify themselves as progressives interested in democratizing classrooms and empowering students. I'm one of these self-identified "progressives." Most of my approaches and activities are dictated by my desire to increase student participation and create an inclusive environment. In my own mind my actions are transparent and innocent. I assume that the sincerity with which I invest them is clear and that it produces the desired positive effects in students. I also assume that my actions designed to democratize the classroom, engage students, and convey authenticity are experienced in the way I intend. But because I built the critically reflective habit into my practice, the lenses of students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, my own experiences, and theory have called these assumptions into question.

As an illustration let me briefly examine some assumptions regarding teacher power. As someone committed to working democratically I believe in my “at-one-ness” with students. Believing my students to be moral equals I like to think I’m really no different from them. I want them to treat me as an equal, a friend not an authority figure. The fact that there’s an institutionally mandated imbalance of power between us, and that I usually know a lot more about the content, is in my mind a temporary imbalance. I view us as co-learners and co-teachers.

This belief exerts a strong influence on me. But by using the four reflective lenses of students, colleagues, experience, and theory I know that my assumption that declaring my at-one-ness with students causes them to see me as one of them is way too naive. In fact the strongly hierarchical culture of higher education, with its structures of authority and its clear demarcation of roles and boundaries, means that I can’t simply wish my influence away. No matter how much I might want it to be otherwise and no matter how informal, friendly, and sincere I might be in my declarations of at-one-ness, I *am* viewed as fundamentally different.

Culturally learned habits of reliance on, or hostility toward, authority figures (especially those from the dominant culture) can’t be broken easily. This is particularly evident when the teacher’s identity is clearly different from students; for example, a man teaching a mostly female class, an upper-class teacher working with working-class students, a person of color teaching white students, or vice versa. In these instances declarations of at-one-ness will come across at worst as lies and at best as inauthentic attempts to curry favor.

Critically aware teachers reject the naive assumption that by saying you’re the students’ friend and equal you thereby magically become so. Instead, they research how students perceive their actions and try to understand the meaning and symbolic significance students assign to them. They come to understand that authentic collaborations will happen only if teachers spend considerable time earning students’ trust by acting democratically, fairly, and respectfully toward them.

Critical Reflection as Uncovering Hegemony

Hegemony (hedge-a-moh-knee) and hegemonic (hedge-a-monic) are hard words to get your tongue around let alone to understand. But they are crucial to understanding the critical part of critical reflection. As developed by a founder of the Italian communist party (Gramsci, 1971), the term *hegemony* describes the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions that benefit a small minority in power are viewed by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good. In contrast to earlier notions of ideology that stressed its imposition from above as a mechanism of control, hegemony stresses learning from below. Gramsci maintained that people proactively learn their own oppression by internalizing the commonsense ideas swirling in the air around them in families, friendships, communities, culture, and social institutions.

Not only are the practices of hegemony actively learned but also people take pride in enacting them. They get pleasure from having perfect attendance records at school, being the first to show up for work and the last to leave, earning extra credit or merit pay for taking on more work, amassing the symbols of a successful life (car, house, consumer goods), and so on. But these ideas and practices that seem so obvious and commonsense are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well.

The subtle cruelty of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We can't peel back the layers of oppression and point the finger at an identifiable group of people whom we accuse as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony—the stock opinions, conventional wisdoms, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted—become part and parcel of everyday life. If there's a conspiracy here, it's the conspiracy of the normal.

A crucial purpose of critical reflection is to uncover and challenge hegemonic assumptions. These are assumptions that we think are in our own best interests but that actually work against us in the long term. With teachers, hegemonic assumptions about what makes them good or what represents best practice serve the interests of groups that have little concern for teachers' mental or physical health. The dark irony of hegemony is that teachers take pride in acting on the very assumptions that work to enslave them. In working diligently to implement these assumptions, teachers become willing prisoners who lock their own cell doors behind them.

As an example, think of the way so many teachers construct their work as fulfilling a vocation. Teaching as vocation implies that we are selfless servants of our calling, our students, and our institutions. Teachers who take this idea as the organizing principle for their professional lives may start to think of any day in which they don't come home exhausted as a day wasted. Or, if not a day wasted, then at least a day when they haven't been all that they can be (to adapt a slogan that first appeared in commercials for army recruitment).

When service to a vocational calling becomes the metaphor you choose to construct your teaching career, then you open the door to hegemony. This is because institutional notions of what it means to be in vocational service subtly co-opt what fulfilling one's vocation looks like. Without you realizing what's happening, your notion of service becomes fused with institutional priorities such as increasing student test scores, securing grants, recruiting more students, spending more time building community relationships, giving prestigious conference presentations, or engaging in scholarly publishing.

This diligent devotion to institutional ends comes to be seen as the mark of a good teacher. A sense of calling becomes distorted to mean that faculty members should deal with larger and larger numbers of students; regularly teach overload courses; serve on

search, alumni, and library committees; generate external funding by winning grant monies; and make regular forays into scholarly publishing. What started out as a desire to be in service to students' learning becomes converted into a slavish adherence to promoting institutional priorities.

So what seems on the surface to be a politically neutral idea on which all could agree—that teaching is a vocation calling for dedication and hard work—becomes distorted into the idea that teachers should squeeze the work of two or three jobs into the space where one can sit comfortably. *Vocation* thus becomes a hegemonic concept—an idea that seems neutral, consensual, and obvious and that teachers gladly embrace, but one that ends up working against their own best interests. The concept of vocation ends up serving the interests of those who want to run colleges efficiently and profitably while spending the least amount of money and employing the smallest number of staff members that they can get away with.

The ingenious cunning of hegemony is that it is embraced, not resisted. Teachers actively look to serve on committees, take on summer school, travel to professional conferences, and increase their advisee roster all to show what good institutional citizens they are. They interpret requests to do more as a welcome sign of their indispensability to the institution. Extra sections, extra committees, extra publishing commitments are accepted with a sense of pleasure. The fact that they're exhausted is taken as a sign of devotion, of superlative commitment, of going the extra mile. The more tired they get, the prouder they feel about their vocational performance.

Of course sooner or later the center cannot hold and they get ill, collapse in exhaustion, or just go on automatic pilot. I know this from personal experience. In the last fifteen years I've had three work-related collapses. One in my office on campus, one at an airport getting ready to board a plane to give a speech, and one driving back from a meeting (I did manage to pull over before passing out!). Each time I was taken to the emergency room for a battery of tests, only to find out that I was physically fine.

If hegemony were a concept of medical pathology my doctors would have been correct to diagnose me as suffering from it. I don't know what prescription they would have written for me: a week of political detoxification maybe? Now bear in mind these three collapses all happened as I was teaching about hegemony, writing books on critical theory examining the idea, and warning people about it. In fact they all occurred well after the first edition of this book, with its attendant analysis of hegemony, was published! So don't think that just knowing about hegemony intellectually means you're always able to recognize when you're caught in its grip.

Conclusion

In this chapter I've tried to set out the fundamentals of critical reflection. To recap, it's a process of intentional and continual scrutiny of the assumptions that inform your teaching practice. These assumptions are scrutinized by viewing them through the four lenses available to any teacher: students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, personal experience, and theory. What makes this reflection critical is its focus on power and hegemony. Informed by the critical theory tradition, critically reflective teachers try to understand the power dynamics of their classrooms and what counts as a justifiable exercise of teacher power. They also attempt to uncover and challenge hegemonic assumptions—those they embrace as being in their best interests that actually cause them harm.

The Four Lenses of Critical Reflection

Assumptions are slippery little things that usually can't be seen clearly by an act of self-will. One particular metaphor comes to mind whenever I think of someone trying to uncover their assumptions by deep introspective analysis and that's being in a clothing store. When you're out on the floor trying on your new jacket you have only one mirror view—the front on view you see every day. But step into a changing room with side mirrors and suddenly you see how you look from multiple perspectives. You gain a fuller picture of yourself, one that represents the ways you look in a 360-degree perspective.

The only way we can become aware of our assumptions, particularly ones we've missed or never been aware of, is to view what we do through the equivalent of the side mirrors in the clothing booth. We need to be able to see ourselves from unfamiliar angles. No matter how much we think we have a full and accurate picture of our practice we're always stymied by our personal limitations. It's impossible to become aware of our own interpretive filters by using those same interpretive filters. This is as futile as a dog furiously chasing its tail.

To some extent we're all prisoners trapped within the frameworks we use to assign meaning to our experience. A self-confirming cycle often develops in which our assumptions shape our actions that are then interpreted to confirm the truth of those assumptions. But the four lenses of critical reflection each

illuminate a different part of our teaching. Taken together they throw our assumptive clusters into sharp relief by providing multiple perspectives on what we think and do. As already outlined in the opening chapter, these lenses are students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory, and personal experience. In this chapter I want to outline what using each of these lenses entails.

Students' Eyes

In *The Skillful Teacher* (Brookfield, 2015b) I argue that the most important pedagogic knowledge we teachers need to do good work is an awareness, week in, week out, of how our students are experiencing learning. Without this knowledge we are working largely in the dark. In order to make good decisions about the ways we organize learning, construct assignments, sequence instruction, and apply specific classroom protocols we need to know what's going on in students' heads. This is the essence of student-centered teaching: knowing how your students experience learning so you can build bridges that take them from where they are now to a new destination.

Discovering how different students in the same classroom see us is one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher's career. Applying one or more of the many classroom assessment techniques available (Butler and McNunn, 2006; Earl, 2012) helps us get inside students' heads and see the classroom as they do. Each time you do this you learn something.

Sometimes the data is reassuring, such as when you find that a method or exercise you employ has the effect you intend for it. It's just as important to know when your assumptions are broadly confirmed as it is to know when they're in error. I need to know that my students are hearing what I want them to hear and seeing what I want them to see. For example, knowing how much students learn from a relevant personal story has encouraged me to work autobiographically whenever it makes sense to do so. Similarly,

having learned that students appreciate my constantly talking out loud about my classroom process, I pay special attention to explain the rationale for each new classroom activity before we go into it.

At other times we're stopped in our tracks to discover the diversity of meanings students read into our words and actions. Students hear as imperatives comments we've made unthinkingly that have no particular significance to us. Answers we give off the cuff to what seem like inconsequential questions are later quoted back to us to prove that now we're contradicting ourselves. What we think is reassuring behavior is interpreted as overprotective coddling. What we deem as an inspired moment of creativity on our part that builds spontaneously on an important teachable moment is seen as inconsistent or confusing. What we regard as a lighthearted remark is appreciated by some but seen as an insult by others.

The chief dynamic to consider when using the lens of students' eyes is that of power. Because of our power to award grades and sanction student progress it's not surprising that people are understandably reluctant to be honest with us. Teachers who say they welcome criticism often react very differently when they actually receive it. Some students will have learned that giving honest commentary on a teacher's actions can backfire horribly. It takes a courageous or foolhardy individual to suggest in class that teachers have unwittingly stifled free discussion, broken promises, or played favorites. And, I have to say that given the egomania of some academics, student paranoia is completely justified.

What will help teachers get accurate information from students is anonymity. Students who are genuinely sure that their responses are anonymous are much more likely to tell the truth. So when you request honest and anonymous feedback from a particular class you must demonstrate that you have no idea who is saying what. After students have seen you openly discussing their feedback on the class several times they may decide you're trustworthy enough to speak honestly with you. But never assume that students believe your assurances that you welcome critique, even if you're totally

sincere. You need to model a non-defensive gratitude for student criticisms for a sustained period before people will start to take you seriously.

The importance of responding non-defensively to anonymous student feedback is crucial. I've seen far too many colleagues react to criticisms by immediately trying to explain them away. They might not say outright that the students are wrong, but they'll correct students by saying that the point of a particular exercise was clearly not understood, or they'll re-justify why an activity that's been criticized was actually worth doing. In terms of teaching, and in leadership generally, this is an absolute no-no. When you receive negative criticism, even if you think it's fundamentally misguided, you need to start by thanking people for the time they spent giving the criticism. Then, if any part of the criticism is unclear you should ask for people to volunteer clarification, assuring them that no one has to identify him- or herself as the source of the criticism.

When the criticism opens up a new perspective for you then that should be acknowledged. If it highlights a problem that you haven't been aware of you should explain how you're going to try to deal with it. If the criticism asks you to do something that you feel is fundamentally wrong, then you stand your ground by explaining and re-justifying why you can't do what's requested. In leadership classes I often get asked to stop harping on race and have to keep clarifying that for me being aware of racial dynamics is a crucial element of effective leadership. But I try never to blame students for feedback or get irritated with its naivety. It's crucial that you show you take it seriously even when you fundamentally disagree with it.

Sometimes teachers protest that soliciting student feedback takes far too much time and means they can't adequately cover all the content that students need to know in order to move forward in their studies. To this point I always respond the same way. If getting students to understand content correctly is your main job, then the only way you can do this job is to keep checking

in that this is happening. Just asking students, “are you following me?” or “is that clear?” is pretty worthless. I can count on the fingers of one hand the times in my life when I’ve seen students say the equivalent of “actually, no, we don’t understand what you’re saying.” Students will be wary of publicly admitting that they’re confused or not following your explanations. But if you institute regular opportunities for students to provide anonymous information on how they’re understanding content you’ll be much better placed to know whether or not you need to revisit some earlier material, re-explain something, or quicken the pace.

The only way we can know if students are learning what we intend for them to learn is by checking in with them. Sure, you can wait for a midterm exam to find out that things have gone awry, but isn’t it better to know as soon as possible that students aren’t understanding the all-important content? That way you can adjust or take remedial steps before things get worse and too much time has passed. This deliberately utilitarian justification neatly sidesteps the usual “all this participatory stuff is fine if you had the time but I’ve got too much content to cover” argument I often hear.

The lens of students’ eyes has been the most important of the four critically reflective lenses in my own career and that’s why I begin with it. When you understand the different ways students view your practice it can open up productively disturbing insights for you. Assumptions that you believed to be self-evidently true are sometimes shown to be without real empirical foundation.

When it comes to understanding the power dynamics of classrooms I don’t see how you can possibly know what these are without regular anonymous student feedback. Many times I’ve been stopped in my tracks by student comments regarding the exercise of my authority, particularly when I think I’m being transparent, but students see me as shifty or evasive. I’ve also come to understand the essentials of an ethical use of authority much better: the need to respond non-defensively to criticisms, the need to model my own engagement in any risky activity I’m asking people to do,

and the importance of self-disclosure. To me the lens of students' eyes is the Rosetta stone needed to decode assumptions of power.

Colleagues' Perceptions

The presence of critical friends is at the heart of the critically reflective process. A critical friend is someone who strives to help you unearth and check your assumptions and opens you up to new perspectives about familiar problems. When we hit experiential bumps in the road of life or encounter the disorienting dilemmas beloved of transformative learning theorists, the first thing many of us do is run to our best friends. Your truest friends are those who stand by you when you're in trouble. They provide a sympathetic ear as you talk out whatever grief or frustration you're going through. Sometimes this helps you come to new insights about your situation and discover how to deal with it.

The best teaching colleagues are critical friends. They'll encourage you to describe a problem as you see it, take the time to ask you questions about it, and suggest different ways of thinking it through. Institutions may force us to teach solo, and staff meetings may focus on policies, personnel, and organizational difficulties, but in corridors, cafeterias, and sometimes online the real work of teaching is shared. The biggest difficulty I faced as a part-time, adjunct teacher was not having a trusted group of colleagues, or even a single person, I could talk to about the things I was experiencing. Without the need to pay rent I never would have made it through that first year.

Talking to colleagues unravels the shroud of silence in which our work is wrapped. It's one of the many reasons why I prefer team teaching (Plank, 2011). To have a colleague who helps you debrief the class you've just taught and who alerts you to things (positive and negative) you've missed is extremely helpful for your own efforts to check your assumptions about what's happening. In reflection groups talking about classroom dynamics that you think

are unique to you usually prompts colleagues to disclose how they negotiate those same dynamics. Sometimes they'll describe a very different interpretation of a situation than the one you hold. This helps you check, verify, or reframe the assumptions you've brought to your own analysis of it.

Some of the best conversations I've had with colleagues concern the nature of resistance to learning. Because I'm a driven, type A personality, I want to do good work and teach classes full of eagerly motivated students. Throughout my career I've had a specific image of a good class. It's one in which everybody says something, there are no awkward silences, students ask provocative and pertinent questions, and there are multiple nonverbal indications of student engagement. People sit on the edge of their chairs leaning forward, their eyes ablaze with enthusiasm, interspersed with frequent nods of recognition, and smiles of appreciation. This unrealistic and naive image is so far removed from what actually happens in most of my classes that I'm constantly fixated on why students seem to be resisting the learning I'm urging on them.

Over the years colleagues have suggested to me some very different readings of, and perspectives on, student resistance. I've realized that students' resistance to my efforts is sometimes grounded in events that happened before I showed up. For example, one year I taught a course that had been identified with a much loved-teacher who didn't get tenure. Not surprisingly, I got a frosty reaction from students in the department. Even if I don't receive a startling new insight from a colleague on why students seem disengaged it's helpful to know I'm not alone. Pretty much every time I ask a colleague to help talk me through a problem I'm facing, that colleague tells me how she or he is also dealing with it. At the very least this makes me feel I'm not a total impostor.

Faculty learning communities—groups of colleagues from across the disciplines coming together to explore a shared problem—provide another avenue of collegial feedback (Felton, Bauman, Kheriaty, and Taylor, 2013; Lenning, Hill, Saunders,

Solan, and Stokes, 2013; Palmer and Zajonc, 2010). During the writing of this book I co-lead such a community that focused on exploring racial dynamics in college classrooms. From disciplines as diverse as biology, theology, physics, and art history we shared experiences of both white teachers and teachers of color dealing with expressions of racism in our classes and also approaches to raising racial issues with reluctant students.

In my experience the best teacher-reflection groups are those composed of people from multiple disciplines: art history to engineering, management to theology. Discipline-specific groups have an initial ease but often come to early conclusions. Multidisciplinary groups quickly discover that the problems they face are remarkably similar: how to work with underprepared students, how to sequence curriculum, how to design assignments that test student knowledge accurately, and so on. But the specific ways people describe how they accomplish these tasks in their own subjects varies widely. I have found that people are more likely to discover genuinely new ways to think about problems in multidisciplinary work groups than in discipline-specific ones.

To sum up, when colleagues function as critical friends they affirm that our problems are not idiosyncratic blemishes that we need to keep hidden but shared dilemmas. They help us sort out how we frame a problem and whether the problem we're obsessing about is the real problem we need to deal with. They offer multiple perspectives and viewpoints on a situation and help us decide what parts of our analysis or response are valid and what needs reexamining. Although critical reflection typically is conceptualized and practiced as a solo endeavor, it's actually a collective enterprise. A conversation, whether mediated or unmediated, synchronous or asynchronous, in which colleagues are genuinely seeking to understand how you experience a problem and then reflect back to you their own interpretations and reactions to it, is a fantastic way to open people up to new ways of thinking and acting.

Personal Experience

Of the four lenses of critical reflection this is the lens that gets the least respect. This is because western epistemology is still dictated by its Enlightenment roots and the birth of scientism. This epistemology holds that accurate knowledge is created through the application of protocols developed and monitored by a community of scholars alert to individual subjective bias. Truth is established when the accumulation of insights derived from these applications coalesce into a theory explaining a discrete part of the world. The most effective academic put-down is to dismiss a view or proposition as “merely anecdotal,” in other words, as hopelessly subjective or impressionistic. Academic research that investigates personal experience through stories (Shadlow, 2013) or scholarly personal narratives (Nash and Viray, 2013, 2014) has a hard time being accepted as legitimate inside the academy.

Yet accounts of personal experience typically move us more than summaries of findings in a research study. Politicians know that you secure support for a policy by embedding your case for it in a personal story. When I think of the factors that shape how I teach, it’s personal experiences of particular teachers that come to mind rather than theories I’ve studied or research reports I’ve read. Yet when personal experience is dropped into a conversation about teaching it’s often prefaced by someone saying, “of course I’ve got no real evidence for this; it’s just my own experience” as if your own experience should be discounted as inherently invalid.

One of the most stringent objections to taking personal experience seriously is that it’s unique and therefore ungeneralizable. It’s true that at one level experience is idiosyncratic. No one experiences the death of a parent in exactly the same way as anyone else, with the same mix of memories intertwined into the grief and pain. Yet predictable rhythms of bereavement with their dynamics of denial, anger, and acceptance are discernible across multiple lives.

Specific experiences always have universal elements embedded within them.

The fact that people recognize aspects of their experiences in the stories others tell is one of the appeals of the collegial teacher-reflection groups I described previously. This is why support groups for those going through periods of crisis or transition are so crucial. When I describe how I constantly feel like an impostor I can see the light of mutual recognition dawn in people's eyes. As you hear someone telling how he stopped cancer defining his life, responded to depression, struggled with addiction, or dealt with the death of someone she cared about, you'll hear echoes of, and sometimes direct parallels to, your own experience. The details and characters may differ from case to case, but many of the tensions and dilemmas are the same.

Personal experiences of learning are intertwined with teaching practice. All of us gravitate seemingly instinctively toward certain ways of working. Some teachers rely on group work, others on independent study. Some are compelled to stick to preannounced plans; others delight in breaking away from structures and building on unexpected events. I would argue that we can trace the impulse for many of these decisions back to the kinds of situations in which we felt excited or confused as learners. We assume that what worked for us will be similarly galvanizing for our own students. How we've been bored or engaged as learners, what approaches and activities have helped or inhibited our understanding, which of our teachers made a difference for us and which we felt were a waste of space—all these elements are far more influential than we often realize.

Let me use myself as an example. As a student I was a bad test taker. No matter how hard or long I studied, when I entered the exam room my anxiety was so strong it was hard for me to focus. Consequently, I have a history of failing exams. This means that as a teacher I try to introduce multiple forms of student assessment. I always give second chances, am open to renegotiating aspects of the curriculum, and assume that when students say they need more

time they're telling the truth. This is directly a result of my own bad experience with closed-book exams.

Or take the way I run discussions. As a student I hated speaking up in discussions and got very nervous when required to do so. I felt I never sounded smart enough or never had anything worthwhile to say. So I'd stay silent and as much as possible let other students take the risk of speaking up. I was actively thinking about the content of what was being talked about and struggling to understand the different viewpoints expressed, but I just hated opening my mouth.

Because of this experience I structure my own discussions in very specific ways. I use a rubric to grade participation that emphasizes listening and responding rather than speaking a lot or sounding smart. My discussion protocols are designed for introverts and contain specific periods for silent reflection. Some have no speech at all. With my colleague Steve Preskill I've written two books specifically on the dynamics and protocols of discussion (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005, 2016) and pretty much every one of the discussion activities we suggest springs to some degree from my personal experiences as a student participating in discussions.

When it comes to investigating student disengagement or student hostility and resistance to learning, personal experience has provided one of the most fruitful sources of data for me. I simply have to ask myself what typically causes me to disengage from activities in conference sessions, professional development workshops, or faculty meetings. The top ten answers are immediate and clear:

- I don't see the reason why I'm being asked to do a particular activity.
- The instructions provided are unclear.
- The time allowed for it is too short.
- The leader has not demonstrated any commitment to the activity.
- I fail to see how this activity will do anything for me or my colleagues.

- I don't have any experience or knowledge that would enable me to participate.
- I've been burned by participating in similar activities in the past.
- I don't trust the leader.
- I don't want to say anything for fear of looking stupid.
- I'm tired and can't be bothered.

None of these reasons for my disengagement are particularly earth-shattering or dramatic. But associated with each of these reasons are some very vivid personal experiences. I recall faculty meetings in which small-group discussions were called on significant matters with hardly any time allowed for deep conversation. I remember task force meetings in which input was asked for but no guarantee that it would be taken seriously was demonstrated. I remember conference sessions in which presenters asked for early input from the audience that would shape the presentation and then delivered what had clearly been preplanned. And I remember small-group discussions in which the leader said all viewpoints were welcome and then made it subtly clear that some were off limits.

It takes no time at all to remember each of these incidents, and they teach me important lessons. I know I have to be very clear in explaining what's going on and why it's necessary and helpful. I have to make sure I model my own commitment to an activity before asking anyone else to do it. I have to allow sufficient time and not feel I have to cram everything that's important to me into a space that feels rushed for participants. I have to make sure a discussion is one that students bring relevant knowledge to. I have to create opportunities for anonymous participation. And I must never make a promise that I'm not prepared to keep.

Theory

The final lens of critical reflection—theory—is the hardest sell. Time and time again I hear teachers say they don't have time to

read or that educational theory and research really doesn't have anything to do with the particularities of their classrooms. It's strange to hear a mistrust of theory voiced by educators, but I also understand why they feel that way. As a writer on critical theory (Brookfield, 2004) I'm often frustrated by the way an activist-inclined body of work intended to bring about democratic socialist transformation can be written so obtusely. Similarly, the hostility of some academic journals to strongly personal descriptive writing means that the last place an instructor will go for help with a teaching problem is to the journal shelves in the library. I know in my own trajectory that I spent years while teaching at Columbia University (New York) writing articles pretty much for the sole purpose of impressing the as-yet-unnamed members of my future tenure and full professor committee. It was only after getting tenure that I was free to write books that were meant to be helpful.

Yet reading theory can sometimes feel like coming home. You stumble on a piece of work that puts into cogent words something you've felt but been unable to articulate. Finding a theorist who makes explicit something you've been sensing or who states publicly what you've suspected privately but felt unable to express is wonderfully affirming. Thirty years ago I remember Paulo Freire in a "talking book" with Ira Shor (Shor and Freire, 1987) stating, "You can still be very critical lecturing. . . . The question is not banking lectures or no lectures, because traditional teachers will make reality opaque whether they lecture or lead discussions. A liberating teacher will illuminate reality even if he or she lectures. The question is the content and dynamism of the lecture, the approach to the object to be known. Does it critically re-orient students to society? Does it animate their critical thinking or not?" (p. 40). This clarified what I'd sensed was an overly simplistic element in my analysis of lectures as inherently authoritarian and discussions as inherently democratic.

When I first read Marcuse's (1965) comments on teaching through democratic discussion, it clarified for me some misgivings that had been bubbling under the surface. Democratic discussion's

intent is to honor and respect each learner's voice by valuing all contributions. But the implicit assumption that all contributions to a discussion carry equal weight means discussion leaders rarely point out when a contribution is skewed or just plain wrong. In Marcuse's view, the idea of democratizing discussion groups means that "the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with falsehood. This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad" (1965, p. 94).

This brief comment distilled something I'd felt but been queasy about owning up to. It challenged my reluctance to critique students' factual or reasoning errors and sent me on a journey to understand how to point these out without permanently shutting discussion down. Similarly, Baptiste's (2000, 2001) work on the use of ethical coercion in teaching made me realize how power relations are embedded in the most benign requests I make of students. For example, when I ask a group, "can we form into small groups please?" I'm not really asking a question. I'm *telling* the students to form into small groups. Again, my saying, "I'd like us to turn to page 80 if we can, please" is not an expression of personal preference that students can choose to follow or not. It's a direct instruction. Behind my language of facilitation or encouragement to students is a clear exercise of institutional power.

Theory can also crash into your life in a productively disturbing way by unsettling the groupthink arising from cultural norms and shared experiences. Theory that explodes settled worldviews is important because it combats the groupthink that sometimes emerges in collegial reflection groups. Institutionally sponsored groups, even those with members from very different disciplinary backgrounds and teaching very different kinds of students, nonetheless share a common organizational history and culture. Even at

a professional conference where you meet strangers from multiple institutions across the world there's still a disciplinary orientation present that defines what gets talked about and which sources of knowledge are taken seriously.

When a book presents an analysis of a familiar situation that catches you off guard and skews your world, this can be creatively dissonant. I've already talked about how reading Foucault (1980) totally changed the way I thought about power in my classrooms. Similarly, reading about the commission of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010, 2016), or the ways in which white educators engage in preaching and disdaining when working with supposedly less-enlightened whites (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness [(ECCW), 2010), challenged my self-image as a "good white person." This work productively disturbed my sense of myself as someone who was largely free of racism and was one of the "good guys" working for racial justice. Instead I began to investigate how racism lived in me and expressed itself through my actions, an investigation that has led me into a long experimentation with narrative disclosure as a tool of antiracist teaching (Brookfield, 2015A).

Conclusion

Since the first edition of this book appeared in 1995 there's been an explosion in programs and protocols that ask teachers to reflect on their pedagogic experiences. It's not uncommon for reflection to be institutionally mandated and for teachers' reflective capacities to be assessed. Although I'm all in favor of critical reflection and love to be involved with colleagues who are collectively hunting assumptions and opening themselves up to new perspectives, I'm troubled by the notion of mandating and assessing reflective practice. It's so easy for this to become instrumentalized and for reflection to be reduced to a reductionistic checklist: "I uncovered five assumptions this week," "I asked for student feedback in three

classes,” “I read this article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,” and so on. Additionally, measures to assess teachers’ capacity to reflect on personal experience are designed to record how this happens in individuals. This is a direct contradiction to the way teachers and other practitioners describe how it actually happens. In accounts from multiple educational and human services professions (Bradbury, Frost, Kilminster, and Zukas, 2010; Fook and Gardner, 2007, 2013), it’s clear this is a collaborative endeavor.

Finally, there’s a mandatory confessional tone to much of what passes for reflective practice. In an interesting application of Foucault’s (1997) notion of confessional practices, Fejas (2016) points out how performance appraisals ask teachers to gaze into themselves: “to scrutinize their inner selves—that is, to turn their gaze towards who they ‘truly are’ and who they wish to become” (p. 8). There’s a subtle trajectory implied in asking employees to reflect—what we might call the mandated confessional. Reporting in an end-of-year appraisal interview that your reflection has pretty much confirmed what you thought at the beginning of the year, that no new insights into teaching have emerged, and that no perspectives transformed is probably not going to cut it. What’s called for is a dramatic transformation along the lines of “I used to hold this erroneous assumption but by reflecting on my practice I’ve transformed my experience and have a wholly new perspective.”

So although I advocate for critical reflection (indeed chapter 5 extols its benefits at length) I’m suspicious of its mandatory measurement. When reflective assessment protocols are determined in advance, and teachers are required to show a suitable level of reflectivity to get reappointment, promotion, and tenure, the collaborative and collective dimension of reflection is entirely lost. Measuring reflection becomes a power play, a way for administrators to control employees by specifying the type of reflection that’s permissible or legitimate. Instead of being a collective journey into mutual ambiguity it becomes a means of aligning individual actions and preferences with institutional needs.

The lenses explored in this chapter provide four different ways for teachers to look at what they do. All teachers have access to all of them, though the degree to which they can use a particular one depends on external constraints, the chief of which is time. The larger the class, the more complex is the process of seeing our teaching through students' eyes. Adjuncts shuttling between multiple institutions have little chance to form collegial relationships. Personal experience is easily discounted as subjective and unreliable, and good theory takes time to locate and study. But, as we shall see in chapter 5, when we try to build these lenses into our teaching we do better work.