
FORUM

Some Thoughts on Critical Thinking

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Turn your back and keep your eyes shut,
For if the Gorgon head appears,
And you should see it,
All chance of your return above is lost.
—from Dante's *Inferno*

Given the climate of perceived systemic failures in education, at the K-20 Critical Thinking workshop this summer I expected some dissonance between community college professors, K-12 teachers, and faculty members from the big brother of public education, Washington State University. A workshop sponsored by the College of Education and CO-TEACH and the Washington State University Critical Thinking Project could be just another version of Orwell's novel where, once again, the dictatorial authority seeks out a scapegoat for all the ills that plague the system.

I first realized, however, that the people who know what is happening in the Washington State education system are not in higher education, on the whole. In breakout sessions and in larger group discussions, I felt a camaraderie with elementary school, middle school, high school, and community college teachers that made it impossible, even self-delusional, to assume any top-down educational hierarchy should exist in this state. I learned more from these teachers in three days than I had learned in numerous other workshops offered under the auspices of "professional development."

Most importantly, I came away with an irrevocable sense of hope. It has become too easy to believe the apocalypse of genuine literacy is near. Both fascinating and grotesque, like rumor, blame finds its way into the classroom and perches before public school teachers like a raven. In the face of my near burn-out as a

teacher, I came away from the workshop grateful that other teachers in this state are full of expertise, and are able to listen, believe, speak, and disagree with respect and humor, despite the rap, rap, rapping at the door.

Still, I admit to being an English professor, which means I am guilty of sedition. We are patrician, which includes a Promethean view of existence that exalts the creative and rebellious power of the individual (while recognizing the tragic agony that comes with it). Janet Gail Donald explains in her text, *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives*, that we English types see paradox and antinomy everywhere, a perturbing idea to some but a touchstone for me when I find myself engaging the complexities of a fuzzy discipline that relies on controversy and consensus rather than undisputed laws like Newton's mechanics (233-234). We are always seeking evidence and policing the unreliable narrators, the fraudulent story tellers, like the Greek warrior, Sinon, who persuades the Trojans that the massive wooden horse is, in reality, a blessing instead of a curse and should be taken into the center of the city. At the risk of dragging a wooden horse into the citadel of Troy, I write on.

On the second day of the workshop, the purpose of one particular breakout session was to openly discuss non-traditional students and our approaches to teaching writing and thinking within this context. Ultimately we were talking about assimilation, and its problems, without naming it, fully aware that convention and standard can, in the turn of a kaleidoscope, disable authenticity. The idea here was to learn to listen and honestly consider the veracity of alternative perspectives. We wanted to think about how, as teachers, our resistance to unexpected answers can sometimes transform something organic into something inorganic. We wanted to avoid the Kafka epigraph: "A cage goes searching for a bird." We wanted to learn to give ground for a moment and truly become co-investigators of alternative and uncommon perspectives. Suspend judgment; foster authentic thinkers—for a teacher cannot think for her students nor impose her thinking upon them without subordinating her students' authenticity. This was the hypothesis.

We looked at a short piece of writing by a Korean student. For me, a teacher trained in convention, the essay was obviously upside down; the thesis clung to the bottom of the page for dear life, a last line hanging by a scant thematic connection. The student begins the essay with a general treatise on laughter as a pathway to happiness and fulfillment, but ends almost out of the blue on a serious declaration about misguided politics in the Philippines—the election was the laughing stock of the world.

Almost automatically, an appropriate pedagogical response seemed apparent. Explain to the Korean student that if she desires to align her writing with the

conventions of academic discourse, she must turn the essay on its head, placing the guiding thesis near the beginning. She has a choice. Depending on the situation she finds herself in, she can learn to pull a rabbit out of the hat instead of a strange gorgon and thus ensure plausible success when writing within the dominant system. For after all we all find ourselves shaping our stories to the expectations and laws of our discipline, making our ideas and perspectives more palatable to the gods.

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire suggests that this advice is problematic. Such a perspective is still an attempt to control thinking and action because it asks men and women to adjust to the known world at some unknown expense that could be vast. Identifying with charismatic teachers can make one feel active and effective, but it is no remedy. It confuses knowledge with authority and merely measures how well a person fits into a world defined by an imaginary center that is, admittedly for many, predominantly white and male. Tranquility replaces action; mitigated by the desire to act effectively within the primary system, the “ready-to-wear” approach may negate genuine thought (76). Instead of participating in a dialogue, the desire for efficiency carries us along in the prescribed direction without most of us even knowing it.

So the breakout session began with the opening question about the Korean student’s writing: “What is the thesis?” Many of the teachers in the group understood the set-up—there was, behind the question, an agenda for discussion and a fairly discernable best answer to this query. I saw the answer clearly. There, in the last line of the essay, unmindful of academic convention, was the student’s real purpose for writing. Richard Sittinghorse, a teacher from Muckleshoot Tribal School, offered an answer to this opening question before anyone else. He said, “The thesis is that laughter is the key to happiness.”

There was a silent pause; people were looking around at each other. I even got excited to say otherwise, to demonstrate that I knew the *correct* answer. But someone else beat me to it, suggested that the real thesis certainly has something to do with the Korean student’s feelings about the dubious election in the Philippines. Others agreed. Richard Sittinghorse remained silent. We went on from there as planned, consciously or not. And we had an enlightening discussion, even achieving genuine communication across boundaries traditionally crossed only by people like Cooper’s Leatherstocking or writers like Sherman Alexie and Spike Lee. The humor was liberating. Never had I witnessed people so willing to speak this openly about issues of power and race. We were not afraid.

It occurs to me now that even in the midst of excellence, we missed something fundamental about the distance between intentions and actions, something subtle.

Richard Paul writes, “Wherever we find people, we find blatant contradictions between word and deed” (139). As a group, perhaps we failed to initially pause and honestly consider that Richard Sittinghorse’s answer to the question was authentic in ways we may not have understood. In our haste to underscore knowledge about Korean culture and the reluctance people from that culture demonstrate when asked to speak directly about their thoughts and desires, we missed the potential worth of a non-traditional answer to a question. Given that Sittinghorse is Native American his response unearthed an amusing anecdote on one true problem of academic life.

I grew up looking at the images of Chief Joseph and Geronimo, Native American photographs taken by Edward Curtis, a legendary Seattle resident and artisan of photography. As legend has it, his *Mosa*—an image of a impassive Indian girl—so impressed and stirred J.P. Morgan that he wrote Curtis a check for \$100,000 on the spot, funding Curtis’ wide-ranging travels to photograph a vanishing way of life, which resulted in *The North American Indian*, a twenty-volume set of prints and notes prized today for its rare beauty. Yet to see Curtis’ work as representative of reality is to look only at incomplete evidence. For in 1900-1928, many Native Americans were changing rapidly, by force, into foreign landscapes, foreign clothes, and foreign religions: assimilating into the dominant culture. The viewers of Curtis’ photographs see a distortion. The black-and-white images of the heroic warriors like Chief Joseph underscore over and over a kind of mystical stoicism that under contemporary circumstances may prompt some people to say, “Funny, you don’t look Native American.” And that anticipated look is historically and deeply wrought with tenacity and sorrow, for when have you ever seen an image of a Native American laughing?

Earlier in the workshop, I was fascinated by the introductory remarks of Sherri Foreman also a native teacher from Muckleshoot Tribal School, a remarkable young woman, dedicated and intelligent and certainly authentic. She announced to the entire group that she had lost some of her front teeth. She informed us all that she liked to laugh and so, yes, she would not be hiding the gaps in her teeth and now everyone knows.

So what is the conclusion? Laughter transforms us long before political elections and thus, in the end, may indeed be the key to genuine happiness. This seems particularly true for native people whose official leaders, the ones appointed by whites, partook in politics that technically manipulated their people into repertoires of someone else’s making. In the face of ethnocentrism and power, laughter is a signal of authenticity? I don’t know for sure. George Orwell seemingly thought so when he wrote “Shooting an Elephant.” David James Duncan, in his short story

“Another Brutal Indian Attack,” convinces us that laughter and authenticity are without a doubt the same thing. Certainly, one of the clearest signals that something healthy is afoot is the impulse to sort through and question what is based on authority alone. Only then can we make way for the intellectual possibility of critical thinking.

How do we teach people to think independently when we are not indifferent to the conclusions they draw? The answer is not self-evident. As Jim Harrison writes in the first line of his new novella *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*, “The danger of civilization is that you will piss away your life on nonsense.” I think I understand Harrison’s point. I came away from the workshop more aware that one’s understanding is always limited, often much more so than is apparent. This notion comes right off Raymond Nickerson’s list of *What Constitutes Good Thinking* (30). Not all of us think alike. And how dull and uninteresting the world would be if it were otherwise. But paradoxically, even though Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, it also seems apparent that society does not always appreciate people who think for themselves. As teachers we must understand that good thinking requires an aggressive enthusiasm for alternative points of view, full well knowing that it doesn’t come naturally to any of us. ✱

Works Cited

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