

*Personal constructs and
critical theory: how may
they be reconciled?*

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Aim

To propose a teaching methodology that can assist students' criticality.

This involves systematic reflection on the relationship between the learners' own, personal theories and the public theories of the academic domain.

Rationale

Purpose of academic study:

to foster students' autonomous and intentional intellectual activity in order to critically comment on society (Barnett, 1992, 1997).

to teach learners, not how to 'absorb' knowledge/facts, but rather how to generate their own knowledge and apply this in different contexts (MacLellan 1999).

But:

Criticality is seen as one of the most difficult academic skills (MacLellan 1999; Marienau & Fiddler, 2002; Martin 2005).

What is critical thinking?

Challenging the claims put forward to support a position by examining their evidence base, implications and applicability in different contexts, in order to assess their validity (Walker & Finney, 1999).

Or else, critical engagement enables students to:

- Examine the WHYs and HOWs of knowledge, not just the WHATs.
- Question the nature and foundations of knowledge, examining the assumptions upon which it rests and considering alternative interpretations/possibilities.
- Assess the evidence base of ‘facts’ in order to assess their validity.

Complexities surrounding criticality

Criticality is difficult to achieve because:

- It requires a different type of engagement—challenging the taken-for-granted view of the world and its constructs.
- Academic knowledge seen as unquestionable, fixed, unproblematic, offered from teacher to learner.
- Academic constructs perceived as detached and irrelevant to students' everyday lives and concerns.

The thesis proposed here:

Learners can adopt a critical stance towards knowledge (its foundations, evidence base, assumptions and implications) if they first manage to become critical towards their own theories and experiences.

Personal and public theories

(Griffiths & Tann, 1992)

Personal theories

- Individuals' personal constructs and subjective interpretations of the world.
- Based on 'evidence' – everyday experience.
- Small scale, unsystematic, implicit and focusing on the particular.

Public theories

- Scientific constructs, scrutinised, debated, challenged and accepted in public domain.
- Based on research evidence.
- Large scale, systematic, explicit and focusing on the universal.

The common grounds between personal and public theories

- They are both theories/constructs that guide our understandings of the world and actions.
- They are both based on some form of evidence (everyday experience/empirical research).
- They are both used to interpret the world and make predictions.
- They both draw upon certain assumptions that may be implicit and often unacknowledged.

Making links between personal and public theories

Learners are first supported to interrogate the grounding of their own knowledge (its assumptions, foundations and evidence base) before comparing it to the public constructs of the academic domain.

Making links between personal/public theories is facilitated by the process of reflection.

**‘To reflect is to think’ (Van Manen, 1991, p. 11) —
an umbrella of the mind’s various activities.**

- **Critical reflection**

It moves beyond the external sign to the processes by which it was formed. It analyses, examines questions, challenges assumptions, de-constructs and re-constructs the meanings/structures of the external world.

Employed to examine public theories.

- **Self reflection**

It focuses on the mind’s own activity, beliefs, predispositions and processes. It can challenge often implicit assumptions and personal constructs and re-construct them on a new basis.

It examines learners’ own awareness and shifts in awareness.

Employed to explore personal theories.

Relationship between critical reflection and self reflection

Being critical about what one sees in the world relies upon an explicit understanding of the ways one sees the world.

Similarly, the way one sees the world has an impact upon what one sees.

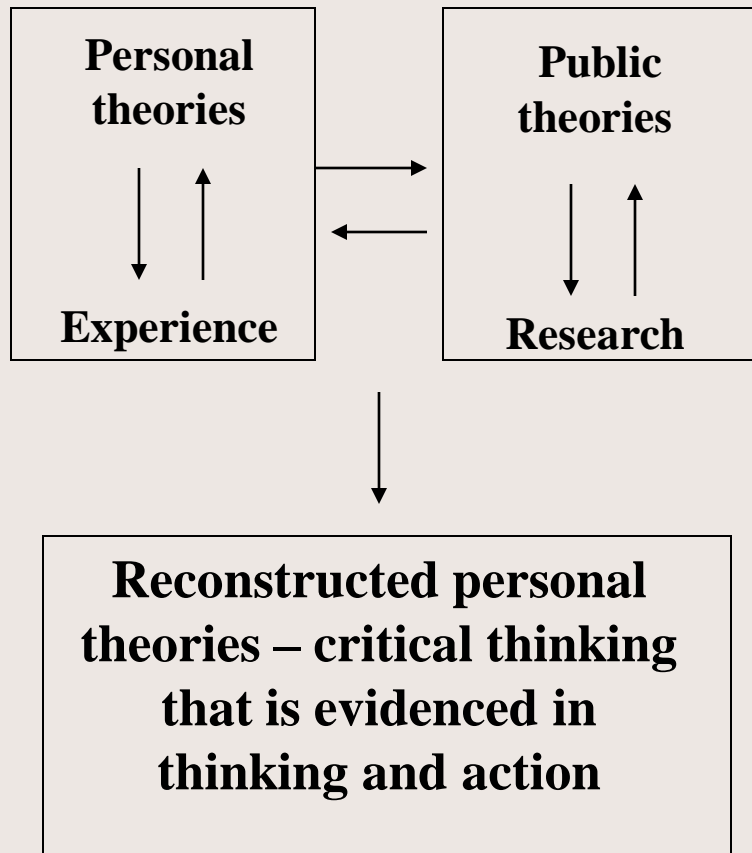
Learners supported to shift focus from the self to the world and then again to the self's understanding of the world.

Levels of reflection

Perry's cognitive schema (1970)

1. Dualistic conceptualisation of knowledge—acquiring objective facts that are transmitted from teacher to learner. Little room for ambiguity and uncertainty.
2. Multiplicity: knowledge seen as subjective and personal. Different positions accepted, but not assessed based on their relative merits.
3. Contextual relativism: some positions are better due to supporting evidence and quality of argument.
4. Critical thought: critical thinking that is evidenced in behaviour. Re-constructed personal theories.

The teaching methodology



1. Self reference effect: introduce course theme and invite students to reflect on what they know/believe about this topic.
2. Examining evidence: students asked to support their views – present their evidence. Opportunity to experience dissonance (other students' different theories and evidence)
3. Presentation of public theories, examination of evidence.
4. Comparisons/contrasts and evaluation of each construct.

Research methodology

- **The course:** ‘Childhood’ offers a multidisciplinary and universal dimension and assumes a social constructionist stance. The duration is 9 months, but only 7 tutorials. Prior professional experience is not a requirement.
- **The sample:** 14 volunteers from 2 cohorts. All were women that were practitioners and/or parents.
- **The tool:** questionnaire administered at the end of the course. Students asked to reflect on their personal theories and the ways these have been reconsidered under the light of public theories.

Findings

Common patterns of responses grouped into the following categories – levels of reflective engagement:

- **Learning as knowing:** learning described as the accumulation of knowledge/facts about children. Knowledge treated as clear cut, unambiguous and definitive.
- **Learning as understanding:** more evaluative reflections. Possibility of different experiences and interpretations of these due to social context. Acknowledgement of the complex nature of issues.
- **Learning as being:** shift of focus from external world to the self. Personal and self reflective stance. Marked change to personal theories and course of action/behaviours.

Limitations

- Small scale, qualitative study – findings are neither representative nor generalisable.
- Self report tools may not always capture the perspectives of respondents.
- The sample was small and the questionnaire was short – volunteers did not represent the whole spectrum of skills, abilities, backgrounds.
- Reflection is not a requirement for this course. The teaching methodology was not part of the curriculum – limited time to reflect, as course themes had to be covered.

The benefits of self reflection

Reflection upon students' personal theories may be useful in fostering criticality because:

- It enables students to become aware of their implicit and deeply rooted, taken-for-granted perceptions of the world.
- It makes them aware of different possibilities.
- It helps them realise the notion of evidence in constructing theories and the role of the former in assessing the latter.
- It makes academic learning more relevant and applicable to students' everyday lives/concerns.

Suggestions

- Course themes could be presented within the context of students' personal experiences and theories, as an alternative interpretation of the theme under discussion.
- The balance between breadth and depth of course themes could be reconsidered, focusing more on offering thinking tools rather than accumulation of 'facts'.

'Education should be teaching us how to think rather than what to think and how to improve our minds so that we can think for ourselves' (Marienau & Fiddler 2002, 10).

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