Critically reflective practice
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Theoretical Foundations

Critically Reflective Practice

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Abstract: *The concept of critical reflection is frequently invoked as a distinguishing feature of good practice in continuing health education. But what exactly is critical reflection? How is it recognized? What are its benefits? How can it be incorporated into professional practice? This article explains the constituent elements of critical reflection and provides an example of how a critically reflective approach can be taken toward continuous, formative evaluation. Four lenses through which educators can view their practice critically are outlined and the critical incident questionnaire is described. The critically reflective habit is proposed as a survival necessity for continuing health educators.*

Key Works: Continuing health education, critical practice, critical reflection

Critically reflective practice is a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work. Critically reflective practitioners constantly research these assumptions by seeing practice through four complementary lenses: the lens of their own autobiographies as learners of reflective practice, the lens of learners' eyes, the lens of colleagues' perceptions, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical, and research literature. Reviewing practice through these lenses makes us more aware of those submerged and unacknowledged power dynamics that infuse all practice settings. It also helps us detect hegemonic assumptions—assumptions that we think are in our own best interests but that actually work against us in the long term.

Becoming aware of our assumptions is a puzzling and contradictory task. Very few of us can get very far doing this on our own. No matter how much we may think we have an accurate sense of ourselves, we are stymied by the fact that we are using our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters. This is the equivalent of a dog trying to catch its tail, or of trying to see the back of your head while looking in the bathroom mirror. To some extent, we are all prisoners trapped within the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our experiences. A self-confirming cycle often develops whereby our uncritically accepted assumptions shape actions that then only serve to confirm the truth of those assumptions. We find it very difficult to stand outside ourselves and see how some of our most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being.

To become critically reflective, we need to find some lenses that reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do. When we embark on this journey, we have the four lenses mentioned earlier. Viewing what we do through these different lenses alerts us to distorted or incomplete aspects of our assumptions that need further investigation. Let me say more about each of these.

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Critically Reflective Lens 1: Our Autobiography as a Learner of Practice

Our autobiography as a learner represents one of the most important sources of insight into practice to which we have access. Yet, in much professional education, personal experience is dismissed and demeaned as "merely anecdotal"—in other words, as hopelessly subjective and impressionistic. It is true, of course, that at one level all experience is inherently idiosyncratic. For example, no one experiences the death of a parent in exactly the same way as anyone else, with the same mix of memories, regrets, affirmations, and pain. Yet, at the same time, bereavement as a process of recognizing and accepting loss contains a number of patterns and rhythms that could be described as generic.

The fact that people recognize aspects of their own individual experiences in the stories others tell is one reason for the success of peer support groups for those in crisis or transition. As I hear you talk about going through a divorce, struggling with illness or addiction, or dealing with the death of partners, friends, and parents, I am likely to hear echoes of, and direct parallels to, my own experience of these events. The same dynamic holds true in teacher reflection groups. As we talk to each other about critical events in our practice, we start to realize that individual crises are usually collectively experienced dilemmas. The details and characters may differ, but the tensions are essentially the same.

Analyzing our autobiographies as learners has important implications for how we teach. Our experiences as learners are felt at a visceral, emotional level much deeper than that of reason. The insights and meanings for practice that we draw from these deep experiences are likely to have a profound and long-lasting influence. They certainly affect us more powerfully than methods or injunctions that we learn from textbooks or hear from superiors. We may think we are teaching according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model only to find, on reflection, that the

foundations of how we work have been laid in our autobiographies as learners. In the face of crises or ambiguities, we fall back instinctively on memories from our times as learners to guide how we respond. As Denlico and Pope found, when teachers are asked to explain why they favor certain approaches "frequently they evidence their choice of method, for instance, by reference to a formative experience of their own, whether it be a positive one which they seek to emulate for their students or a negative one which they strive to avoid reiterating for others" (p. 156).[1]

For example, teachers who were underestimated as students when they were in college are careful not to make the mistake of underestimating their own students. This predisposes them to allow students second chances, to renegotiate course requirements and deadlines, or to give students the benefit of the doubt when they are unable to do what they had promised. Teachers who were reluctant discussion participants in their own student days are not likely to dismiss noncontributors to classroom discussions as mentally negligible, disengaged, or hostile. They may well interpret a student's silence as evidence of her being engaged in reflective analysis. Remembering the cultural and psychological inhibitors to their own discussion participation, they are more inclined to create ground rules that acknowledge the value of silence and that create space for equal participation.

Analyzing our autobiographies as learners often helps explain to us those parts of our practice to which we feel strongly committed, but that seem unconnected to any particular pedagogic model or approach we have learned. Recalling emotionally charged dimensions of our autobiographies as learners helps us understand why we gravitate toward certain ways of doing things and why we avoid certain others. Preferences that seem instinctual (e.g., a liking for group work or independent study, a tendency to personal disclosure or reticence, an emphasis on sticking to announced plans, or a liking for breaking away from structures) can often be traced back to situ-

ations in which we felt inspired or demeaned as learners. A good example of this is Andresen's[2] examination of his own practice as a teacher. Remembering the joy he felt as a student of science at discovering unanticipated connections, he came to understand his career as a teacher "as a search, a pilgrimage, towards recapturing this primary joy" (p. 62).[2] When we are trying to uncover our most deeply embedded allegiances and motivations as teachers, a useful path of analysis is to study our autobiographies as learners.

Critically Reflective Lens 2: Our Learners' Eyes

Seeing ourselves through learners' eyes constitutes one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher's, preceptor's, or staff developer's career. Each time we do this, we learn something. Sometimes what we find out is reassuring. We discover that learners are interpreting our actions in the way that we mean them. They are hearing what we wanted them to hear and seeing what we wanted them to see. But often we are profoundly surprised by the diversity of meanings people read into our words and actions. Comments we made incidentally that had no particular significance to us are heard as imperatives. Answers we gave off the cuff to what seemed like inconsequential questions return to haunt us. Long after we have forgotten them they are quoted back at us to prove that now we are contradicting ourselves. What we think is reassuring behavior on our part is sometimes interpreted as overprotective coddling. What we regard as an inspired moment of creativity, when our awareness of new possibilities causes us to diverge from the plan for the class, is perceived as inconsistent or confusing behavior. A joking aside appreciated by some leaves others insulted.

The chief difficulty with seeing ourselves through learners' eyes lies in the fact that they are understandably reluctant to be too honest with us. They have probably found that giving honest commentary on an educator's actions can backfire horribly. Leaders who say they welcome criticism of their actions vary widely in how they respond when it is actually expressed. Learners have an understandable reluctance to describe how they see the leader's power and authority affecting adversely what happens in an organization. Even under the cloak of anonymity, it feels risky to point out oppressive aspects of a leader's practice. It takes courage to raise in public questions about how leaders have unwittingly stifled free discussion, broken promises, or treated certain kinds of people with more deference than others.

So a cardinal principle of seeing ourselves through learners' eyes is that of ensuring the anonymity of their critical opinions. When people have decided that you have earned their trust, they may choose to speak publicly about negative aspects of your actions. But early on in the history of your relationship with them you will only get honest criticism if the anonymity of this is guaranteed. You have to make students feel safe. After learners have seen you, week in and week out, inviting anonymous commentary on your actions and then discussing this publicly, they start to believe that you mean what you say about the value of critical reflection. But saying you welcome critical commentary from people, and having them actually believe you, are two quite distinct and separate events. Between them lies a period of time in which you model consistently a public, critical scrutiny of your actions. The concern to guard learners' anonymity as a precondition of honest critical commentary has shaped the development of the classroom critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) discussed later in this paper.

Seeing our practice through learners' eyes helps us teach more responsively. Having a sense of what is happening to people as they grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning constitutes educators' primary information. Without this information, it is hard to teach well. It is obviously important to have a good grasp of methods, but it is just as important

to gain some regular insight into what is happening to learners as those methods are put into practice. Without an appreciation of how people are experiencing learning, any methodological choices we make risk being ill informed, inappropriate, or harmful. This is why, in my opinion, the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good educational practice is happening is the extent to which educators deliberately and systematically try to get inside learners' heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view.

Critically Reflective Lens 3: Our Colleagues' Experiences

Talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped. Participating in critical conversation with peers opens us up to their versions of events we have experienced. Our colleagues serve as critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions that often take us by surprise. As they describe their own experiences dealing with the same crises and dilemmas that we face, we are able to check, reframe, and broaden our own theories of practice. For example, if we ask colleagues what they think are the typical causes of learners or trainees' resistance to learning, we will likely hear a spread of responses. Some of these we will have discovered ourselves. Others, such as educators making false promises, educators being perceived as dishonest, or learners' fear of questioning previously unchallenged ways of thinking and behaving, may never have occurred to us. When we ask our colleagues how they have dealt with each of these causes of resistance, we may encounter reactions that surprise us and that suggest new readings of this problem. It may never have occurred to us to apologize for anything we do, to find new ways to justify the learning we want others to consider, or to pay constant attention to our own modeling.

Talking to colleagues about problems we have in common and gaining their perspectives on these increases our chances of stumbling across an interpretation that fits what is happening in a particular situation. A colleague's experiences may suggest dynamics and causes that make much more sense than the explanations we have evolved. If this happens, we are helped enormously in our effort to work out just what we should be doing to deal with the problem. Without an accurate reading of the causes of a problem (are these embedded in our own actions, in our learners' past histories, in the wider political constraints placed on our practice, or in a particular intersection of all of these?), we are crippled in our attempts to work through it.

Checking our readings of problems, responses, assumptions, and justifications against the readings offered by colleagues is crucial if we are to claw a path to critical clarity. Doing this also provides us with a great deal of emotional sustenance. We start to see that what we thought were unique problems and idiosyncratic failings are shared by many others who work in situations like ours. Just knowing that we are not alone in our struggles can be a life-saving realization. Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is, ultimately, a collective endeavor. We need colleagues to help us know what our assumptions are and to help us change the structures of power so that democratic actions and values are rewarded within, and without, our institutions.

Critically Reflective Lens 4: Theoretical Literature

Theory can help us "name" our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences. It can provide multiple perspectives on familiar situations. Studying theory can help us realize that what we thought were signs of our personal failings as practitioners can actually be interpreted as the inevitable con-

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sequence of certain economic, social, and political processes. This stops us falling victim to the belief that we are responsible for everything that happens in our classrooms.

In her study of beginning teachers, Britzman comments that "because they took on the myth that everything depends on the teacher, when things went awry, all they could do was blame themselves rather than reflect upon the complexity of pedagogical encounters" (p. 227).[3] Teachers who subscribe to this myth believe that student lassitude or hostility is the result of teachers not being enthusiastic enough. They get annoyed that they have failed to use the right pedagogical approaches, or that they have not been sufficiently creative in finding points of connection between the subject matter they teach and their students' lives. It can be a life-saving (or at least a career-saving) episode of critical reflection to read a theoretical analysis that helps us to switch our interpretive frames so that we view a situation differently. Reading critical theory, for example, helps us realize that students' disinterest is the predictable consequence of a system that forces people to study disconnected chunks of knowledge at a pace prescribed by curriculum councils and licensure bodies.

We often interpret learners' hostility as being caused by, and, therefore directed specifically at, our own personality. Studying theories of cognitive and moral development can help us understand that this anger can just as plausibly be explained by the fact that learners realize that they are on the verge of changing, or scrutinizing, aspects of themselves that are more easily left untouched. Or, we can read ethnographic research on the experiences of minority learners and understand that, from their point of view, many educators and staff developers are engaged in a kind of con trick. Developers talk about the transformative power of education to move disenfranchised individuals and groups into positions of influence, but minority employees notice that the senior management includes mostly white males. In such circumstances, for educators to receive anything other than hostility would be surprising.

Critical Incident Questionnaire: Critically Reflective Practice in Action

In this section, I want to give a practical illustration of critical reflection in action. This focuses on the CIQ, which is the best method I have found for seeing practice through the lens of learners' eyes.

The CIQ is a single sheet of paper containing five questions, all of which focus on critical moments or actions in a program or class, as judged by the learners. Beneath each question a space is provided for learners to write down whatever they wish. The CIQ is handed out to learners at the end of each week's classes or at the end of each day's training session. The five questions are:

1. At what moment in the class this week were you most engaged as a learner?

2. At what moment in the class this week were you most distanced as a learner?

3. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?

4. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?

5. What surprised you most about the class this week?

As learners write their responses to these questions, their words are copied onto a carbon sheet lying underneath the top sheet. This way learners have a copy of whatever they have written that they keep for themselves. This means that later in the program they can review their responses to classes over the length of the program and start to see habitual preferences, dispositions, and points of avoidance in their learning.

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As learners leave the room, they leave the top copies of their CIQ face down on a table by the door. Alternatively, they give their sheets to a learner who then hands the whole bundle to me. The CIQ sheets are never signed by the learners, so I have no idea who wrote what. This anonymity is crucial. It means that participants can be as brutally honest and critically frank as they like, with no possibility of recrimination. If some learners put their names on the forms in the early stages of a course, I ask them not to do it any more. I explain that what I am looking for is honest, accurate commentary on the class from learners, and I say that I know they will feel constrained in what they write if they have to put their names to their comments. I address the power differential in education, training, and staff development (even those run as adult educational laboratories) head on, and stress that the reason the CIQ responses are anonymous is so that no one can feel that by making a negative comment on the sheet they are imperiling their professional future. I say that I know they will not believe me when I tell them that their criticism is welcomed, since they have probably seen too many educators espouse that belief and then punish learners who challenge professorial competence and authority.

After everyone has left the room, I start to read the responses on the forms. I usually work with groups of about 30 participants and it takes me 15 to 20 minutes to get a sense of the clusters of responses and main themes that are on forms completed by 30 people. I jot down notes on the chief clusters and themes and sometimes pick out verbatim comments that encapsulate several people's reactions. Sometimes I type this information up on a one-page sheet of paper and make Xerox copies for everyone in the class. Sometimes I simply use the notes as the basis of a verbal report.

When we meet again, I start the session by reporting back to the participants the results of their last week's CIQ responses. I invite their reactions, comments, questions, or elaboration concerning these responses, then we spend some time discussing what we need to do about what they

have said or written. Sometimes all that the CIQs reveal is that things are going along fine and no change or renegotiation is necessary. Sometimes it becomes clear that there are problems we need to talk about. Perhaps the pace of the class is wrong for a substantial number of participants. Perhaps there is confusion concerning the required assignments. Maybe expectations that I thought had been clearly stated and understood turn out not to have been heard by participants. Maybe there has been some miscommunication about criteria. Or, maybe an activity that I thought had been going well is actually misfiring. We then spend some time clarifying and negotiating these matters.

Using the CIQ confers the following advantages:

- *It alerts us to problems that need addressing.* Administering the CIQ from the start of a program makes us aware of any problems that exist at an early stage when we can do something about them. It is far better to know what we are dealing with at the outset of an experience when we can take action than to find out that something is seriously wrong at a point when there is not enough time to do anything useful about it.
- *It grounds our actions in accurate information.* Using the CIQ gives us an accurate reading of what is really happening in our classrooms, staff meetings, and training sessions. This means that the actions we take become much more informed than if we relied solely on the evidence of our own eyes. Informed actions are those that we can give a rationale for and those that have the consequences we intend. As is clear from conversations with adult learners about the characteristics of teachers that inspire their confidence,[4] the taking of informed actions is crucial. Learners need to know that their leaders are thoughtful, that they can give a rationale for their actions whenever they are asked, and that what they do grows out

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of their knowledge of how learners are experiencing learning.

- *It develops learners' reflectivity.* As learners get used to completing their weekly CIQs they start to notice patterns in their responses. Certain things seem to engage them while others frustrate or bore them. They notice that they are drawn to some kinds of activities in which they tend to excel, while others are avoided out of fear of embarrassment, humiliation, or shaming. Asking participants to review their CIQ responses over time can help them become much more aware of their own learning preferences, dispositions, and habits of avoidance. When I use the CIQ in my own teaching, I ask learners to submit an analysis of their comments over the semester as part of their assessed participant learning portfolio.[5] After identifying common clusters of responses and recurrent themes, I ask them to focus particularly on the activities about which they feel the most uncomfortable. Then they write a plan for how they would address their tendency to avoid these activities the next time they learn something close to what they have just covered.
- *It builds trust.* Since using the CIQ to collect, report back, and discuss learners' experiences, one of the most frequently mentioned items on the end of course evaluation forms completed by learners has been the way in which this process builds trust within the program. Learners pay close attention to the extent to which educators' words and actions are consistent. One of the ways in which an educator's or staff developer's authenticity is recognized is in the extent to which she "practices what she preaches" or "walks her talk." Seeing an educator spend time soliciting, summarizing, then reporting back learners' opinions is incontrovertible evidence to learners that the educator takes them seriously. Some of the opinions that she publicizes are inevitably

going to be critical of her actions. When she treats these opinions respectfully as useful information to help her make the class more meaningful to learners, a powerful message is sent to learners regarding the power of their voices. More than any other approach I have used in my own teaching, the CIQ has convinced people that I mean what I say when I assure them that their experiences and opinions are valued, and that an open expression of ideas is encouraged. I am convinced that using this instrument is crucial in creating any trust that exists in my classrooms.

- *It justifies our use of diverse teaching and training methods.* Each time I use the CIQ there is a good chance that participants' responses to the various activities in which they have engaged will be divergent and contradictory. As I report back the responses to the previous week's class, it becomes clear to people that they differ greatly in the ways in which they experience learning. Frequently, activities that were the most engaging to some are the most distancing to others. Actions that one group found helpful and affirming are puzzling and confusing to another. Events that took some people completely by surprise are not even mentioned by others. As this diversity of responses is made public week after week, learners can hardly fail to notice that people experience learning very differently. This helps me justify why I try to use a variety of different methods in my own practice. It is a much more powerful way of showing people the importance of diversity in pedagogy than telling them early in the course about learning styles and administering a style inventory of some kind. Through the range of responses learners make each week to the CIQ questions, the concept of diversity is grounded and demonstrated in reference to their own experiences.

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- *It models critical thinking.* One of my strongest convictions about critical thinking is that people learn to do this by watching those in positions of power, respect, and authority model the process in their own lives.[6] As a teacher committed to modeling critical thinking in my actions, I have found the CIQ to be very useful. Each week, students see me trying to observe my practice through their eyes so that I may understand better the effects of my actions. Their written responses help illuminate power dynamics in the classroom that I had thought to be absent or unimportant. Frequently, they point out to me ways in which my protestations of democratic process are contradicted by my instinctive, automatic moves to control what happens. When comments critical of my actions are written on the form, I try to highlight these in my report back to the students. Week after week, they see me react, in as nondefensive a way as I can, to their criticisms of me. I try to celebrate their criticisms and point out to them how much I am learning from them, and how this learning is invigorating my practice.
- *It demonstrates responsiveness.* One of the cardinal principles of adult education is that we treat learners as adults by acting responsively toward them. Being responsive means actively seeking out, and then honoring, people's opinions by thinking carefully about how these affect the educational process. The CIQ is a highly responsive form of evaluative practice in that it surfaces problems and contentious issues as they are being experienced and then addresses them directly. Rather than putting the onus on learners to come to you with concerns, you are taking the initiative to find out how learners are experiencing learning, and how this experience could be enriched.
- *It exemplifies democratic process.* Finally, I like the CIQ because it seems to me that it puts into practice principles of democratic adult education. Through the CIQ, everyone gets to have a voice. It is inclusive in that all class members have the chance to express their opinion. It is equitable in that no one CIQ has any greater intrinsic merit than another. The unnatural hierarchy that often develops in adult education settings whereby those from privileged groups come to speak more, or where natural extroverts come to define the agenda for discussion simply because their ideas are more confidently and frequently expressed, is subverted by the CIQ. Even if you have felt overpowered or subtly excluded by the patterns of interaction in the classroom, the CIQ gives you the same chance as everyone else to record your experiences and express your concerns. Every completed form matters.

A critically reflective practitioner can stand outside her practice and see what she does from a wider perspective. She knows that content and evaluative procedures of continuing professional education are social products that are located in time and space, and that they probably reproduce the inequities of the wider culture. She is able to distinguish between a justifiable and necessary dedication to people's well-being and a self-destructive workaholism. She has a well-grounded rationale for her practice that she can call on to help her make difficult decisions in unpredictable situations. This rationale—a set of critically examined core assumptions about why she does what she does in the way that she does it—is a survival necessity. It grounds practitioners in a moral, intellectual, and political project and gives them an organizing vision of what they are trying to accomplish.

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