

Big change question—Taking into account mainstream economic and political trends, can/should school have a role in developing authentic critical thinking?

Mary Kalantzis · Bill Cope

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A question of truth: the role of the ‘critical’ in pedagogy

‘No Way’, said George Pell when, after the death of Pope John Paul II, a journalist asked if he would like to be the next Pope. ‘No ambitions at all’ (Gibson, 2005). But when he weighs in on the critical pedagogy debate Cardinal George Pell, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, clearly has ambitions broader than an average priest. Take literacy, for example. ‘While parents wonder why their children have never heard of the Romantic poets, Yeats or the Great War poets, and never ploughed through a Bronte, Orwell or Dickens novel’, Pell told a gathering of journalists attending a National Press Club luncheon in Canberra, ‘their children are engaged in analysing a variety of “texts” including films, magazines, advertisements and even road signs as part of critical literacy’ (Pell, 2005; Rowbotham, 2005).

In contemporary debates about education, views like Pell’s are not unusual. In this paper, we will take them to be symptomatic of the conservative critique of teaching critical thinking.

Pell’s problem is not just that what he calls ‘school-based post-modernism, proposes to make students into “agents of social change”.’ It is the kind of social change he believes a critical pedagogy is designed to advocate, and this amounts to an attempt to undermine ‘[g]enerally accepted understandings of family, sexuality, maleness, femaleness, parenthood, and culture’. Any such understandings, he laments ‘are treated as “dominant discourses” that impose and legitimise injustice and intolerance. These dominant discourses are then undermined by a disproportionate focus on “texts” which normalise moral and social disorder’.

M. Kalantzis (✉) · B. Cope
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: mary.kalantzis@rmit.edu.au

B. Cope
Common Ground Publishing, Melbourne, Australia

He calls this the new ‘Dictatorship of Relativism’, taking the title of his talk from a homily preached by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger just before entering the conclave in which he was elected Pope.

Relativism is powerful in Western life, evidenced in many areas from the decline in the study of history and English literature, through to the triumph of subjective values and conscience over moral truth and the downgrading of heterosexual marriage. . . . A dictatorship of relativism is being constituted that recognizes nothing as absolute and which only leaves the ‘I’ and its whims as the ultimate measure (Pell, 2005).

‘Objective reality’, ‘the absolute’, ‘truth’—these are the conceptual counterpoints to critical pedagogy presented by those who would wish to debunk it. Here is a typical list of claims made in the name of this kind of teaching and learning:

Facts—there are definite facts in the world, that can be discovered through the methods of science or history, for instance. Hence, we can safely assume a ‘realist’ view of knowledge, mixing a measure of John Locke’s empiricism (we learn from our sense perceptions) with Francis Bacon’s experimentalism (we learn by trial and error) in order to discover, after a fair bit of hard work, the ‘objective facts’ of the ‘real’ world.

Theories—knowledge comes packaged in theories which sum up the truth of what humans know, such as the narrative of history or the discipline of science. We might keep testing these theories against the facts (Karl Popper’s falsificationalism or Thomas Kuhn’s paradigms), but these bodies of knowledge remain fairly stable over long periods of time. In school, these become the disciplines which we teach as received truth, as revealed through general outlines, abstract generalisations or syntheses of the inner structures of knowledge.

Texts—truths can be found in canonical texts—in great literature or sacred texts which have stood the test of time and been proven by their very durability to be deeper than mere fashion. Such truths can be absorbed by immersion in these texts at school, a traditionalist view of learning from ‘the greats’.

Intellect—man is the measure of all things, and that’s man in the singular. Reason with a capital ‘R’ is the expression of the power of the intellect, as Rene Descartes or Immanuel Kant would have it. And this reason is universal. Given the power to think logically, to think hard enough and long enough, all people should come up with the same rational answers.

Norms—underlying all this are some moral and human absolutes, be they enlightenment (rational or religious), modernism, humanism or progress. These norms we might call the Truth, with a capital ‘T’.

This adds up to a view of knowing, and thus a view of learning appropriate to that knowing, which might variously be labelled traditionalist, absolutist, realist, objectivist, rationalist, structuralist or modernist.

But that same modernity, that same enlightenment, that same tradition of canonical writers, that same line of thinkers who would educate the world in the ways of knowledge, have developed another view of truth, which throws large-T ‘Truth’ into question. This other view, of ‘truth’ with a small ‘t’, is best called ‘critical’:

Facts—you can perceive only what you are looking for. The facts are forever framed by what you want to find or are inclined to see, by your perspectives and your interests. The world only appears to be objective and real. As Richard Rorty or Jean-Francois Lyotard would tell us, the world is actually a figment of our

many-sided and infinitely variable constructions. These constructions are framed by language and discourse. We know the world through the ways in which our particular languages or discourses frame the world.

Theories—we should be suspicious of metanarratives. They seem to have a habit of leaving out the knowledge and perspectives of those who are not powerful—the poor, or women, or minorities, or gays. Competing interpretations seem to cancel the pretence each has to absolutism—how can the Darwinian view of natural history square up with the theory of Intelligent Design by God, when both purport to be definitively correct? And what is the role of the reader, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco might ask, who may interpret the same text or theory in very different ways? Theories to not simply speak unequivocal truth, to be absorbed by learners in an unmediated way. Instead, the likes of Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida would warn us that we should approach theory with a critical eye, deconstruct or dismantle its premises, trace its genealogies and measure it against the practical stuff of power and interests. Then we might uncover the limitations and pretences of universalising, totalising master narratives.

Texts—there are no inherent truths in texts. Even the texts of the canon speak of many, contradictory truths. But who is to say the canon has a special status? One person's canon is another person's irrelevance (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997). A person's reading of a text—what they see in it, and don't see in it—depends on their experiences and interests, their reading position.

Intellect—the universal, reasoning individual does not exist. There is no universal Man who can measure everything from the point of view of a single-minded 'Reason', valid for all people and all times. Rather, there are interpretations in the plural, the products of different bodies (sex, sexuality, age), and different life experiences (class, ethnicity, gender). Varied subjectivities is all there can be.

Norms—no factual assumption should lie unquestioned, no theory unchallenged. If there is any truth at all, it is that there is no fixed and final truth. The critical is the only norm—uncovering perspectives, interrogating facts, testing theories.

This adds up to a view of knowing, and thus a view of learning appropriate to that knowing, which might variously be labelled post-Enlightenment, relativist, idealist, subjectivist, social-constructivist, post-structuralist or post-modernist. It is critical of the apparent fallacies, the oclusions and self-delusions of absolutist large 'T' truth.

And the relativist stance is understandable. The history of the twentieth century provides sufficient cause for one to take fright at the consequences of 'Truth'—the technologists and scientists who know their facts but do not consider sufficiently the consequences of their actions, or the leaders of the modernising fascist or communist states who thought they knew what was best for their backward populaces. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called this the 'dialectic of enlightenment'. Every advance of 'Reason' produced a nightmare where the 'Truths' of the powerful were disastrously imposed. Relativism is a more modest view of what we think we know. It makes for more careful and circumspect knowledge-making. It is less arrogantly confident about what we know and our powers of knowing.

LYNN BELL: Do you think the critical literacy program fails students on a moral basis?

GEORGE PELL: I think it easily can, because it distracts away from the intrinsic beauty that's in literature and it can distort the study for narrow

political purposes and that's often just hostility to what is seen as bourgeois, capitalist society or the cultural predominance of dead white males. ... There are only sort of dominant positions, dominant power structures, there's no such thing as objective truth (Bell, 2005).

And what is this truth? 'Moral laws', says Pell, 'apply to everyone who shares human nature'. For instance,

It might seem hard to believe we would ever reject the most fundamental moral values; but it [would be] hard only 50 years ago to believe [that in the Australia of today] we would abort 100,000 babies a year, contemplate men marrying men, kill the sick, experiment on human embryos Under relativism there is no antidote to Nazism, racism, Communism, fundamentalism: for relativism, whatever is socially supported thereby deserves social support (Pell, 2005).

Not everybody, however, agrees with Pell's version of the 'moral law', not even another Catholic who equally considered it his right to speak in God's name. What if Pell were to become Pope, Julian Ahern was asked?

The Reverend Father Julian Ahern, of Melbourne, said today if Dr Pell, an outspoken defender of traditional Catholic ideals—particularly on the issue of homosexuality—were chosen, it would open up deep rifts in the Catholic Church. Fr Ahern said that Cardinal Pell, in a lecture in the UK last year, had publicly backed the removal of the tradition of freedom of individual conscience in favour of stricter adherence to church rules. "It is the difference between feeling enforced on an issue rather than being persuaded which is, I think, the way that God does things." said Fr Ahern (Gibson, 2005).

If he were to respond to Father Ahern's critical commentary, what could George Pell be other than equally critical in his reply? And as for his lack of interest in becoming Pope, the journalist was also inclined to be critical of Pell's all-too-emphatic 'No way'.

While few are anticipating a Pell papacy, the conservative Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* has named the Archbishop of Sydney as one of 18 frontrunners. Irish bookmakers had listed him as a 40-1 chance of getting the two thirds majority vote required to become the Pope (Gibson, 2005).

Whilst the authority of a conservative Italian newspapers or even an Irish bookmaker may not be equal to God's, it is clearly sufficient to throw into question Pell's denials. Such are the practices of critical investigative journalism, willing always to measure one source of authority, even Cardinal Pell's, against others. The funny thing about truth, is that it is never quite so clear-cut as Pell would have us believe in his attack on relativism. We need to be able to think critically—to interrogate the facts rather than believe our immediate perceptions, to question the presuppositions behind theories, to deconstruct texts, to contrast the interpretations of different intellects and to interrogate norms. This is precisely what Cardinal Pell, Father Ahern and the journalist were doing. The process of critical thinking is an integral process of knowledge-making, and also integral to learning. In fact, critical thinking is essential to learning.

But George Pell is half right about relativism. There are three great dangers in critical thinking based in relativist principles.

First, relativism is unbelievable. There are some real, practical groundings in the world that there is no point in arguing about.

[N]o one believes deep down in relativism. People may express their scepticism about truth and morality in lecture rooms or in print, but afterwards, they will go on to sip a cappuccino, pay the mortgage, drive home on the left side of the road, and presumably avoid acts of murder and cannibalism throughout their evening. People, unless insane, do not live as relativists. They care about truth and follow clear cut rules (Pell, 2005).

Mind you, if somebody tried to report a virgin birth to a hospital or a rising from the dead to an undertaker, their sanity would be questioned, too. And George Pell may drive home on the left side of the road in Sydney but he'd be unwise to do the same in Paris or New York. There's still a substantial role for critical thinking, and at the bottom of this is the questioning of all truths upon which relativism insists. Nevertheless, Pell is right, our everyday experiences (facts of various sorts, including the stuff of life and death) and informed views (widely accepted theories or frameworks of explanation, in which the Darwinian view of natural history is more widely held by the international scientific community than the theory of intelligent design) ground us back into realities. Many of these are so mundane that they remain practically unquestioned for most of the time. Some of these are acts of trust in expertise, in people who know more about a particular thing than we do.

Second, relativism is self-contradictory insofar as it applies to everything except itself.

[W]ise men and women have seen that either relativism is the real truth about the Universe, in which case relativism is wrong since there is a real truth, or relativism is not the real truth, in which case we should all stop thinking about it. The danger today is that people do not even think this far to see the inconsistencies (Pell, 2005).

Pell is right again. However, he might not want to agree that there are reasons why we should make a certain measure relativism an essential part of good knowledge-making, of good learning. Our critical thinking skills, for instance, would have us create a more cross-culturally sensitive road rule than Pell's, perhaps along the lines, 'drive on the side of the road which is appropriate for your country'. We live in a world where people cross borders all the time, and encounter differences. Some differences are hard to understand, but we have no alternative but to try to see how others see things, sympathise with their points of view and understand what they mean and what they do. Relativism is a kind of generosity, an open-mindedness which helps us learn, and a way of shaping solutions to dissonances that might otherwise turn into conflict. Tolerance, human rights and respect are non-negotiables, and this must include an absolute intolerance of intolerance. There's no contradiction here. We should even put the most generous possible construction on what appears to be intolerance or 'fundamentalism', if only because our first reactions to these differences, when we come across them, might be wrong. This might even mean we allow intolerance to speak, but only reasonably; or allow it to act, but not violently. However, that's only because we're always applying our careful, always questioning, always tentative and provisional, critical filters. This kind of

relativism and critical thinking is the norm—the truth—of our times. We do not apply this truth glibly or carelessly, because that would be contrary to our principles. But we do apply it.

The third serious problem with relativism and critical thinking is its potential to dilettantism. It is very easy to criticise, but what do you do? It is easy to say ‘live and let live’, but what to you do next other than withdraw and indulge in your own prejudices? Gunther Kress suggests ‘design’ as an alternative to ‘critique’ (Kress, 2000). Design embodies critical thinking, to be sure, but it also includes the imperative do something in the world. Do not just critically analyse a text or a practice. Critically review it by all means, but only in order to construct a redesigned meaning or practice. Critical thinking is often too narrowly epistemological, interrogating the bases of knowing but all too often without following through with the necessary action or transformation which follows from this knowing.

Homosexuality, Cardinal George Pell has warned, is a ‘greater health hazard than smoking’. Here’s Father Ahern again:

Fr Ahern said that if, as Pope, Dr Pell were to try to impose a belief that homosexuality was caused by mental illness, it could spark global law suits against the church.

‘In the public realm of the church, to be considered mentally ill under George Pell, that would become a principle applied to the whole church and all gay people everywhere would feel that, suddenly, this is really shaming them into despair,’ he said.

A little bit of critical literacy, however, would have done George Pell’s case no harm, nor Fr Ahern’s. When situated relative to his own situation and life experience, Fr Ahern’s stance can be better understood.

Fr Ahern publicly declared he was gay in 1997 and resigned from active ministry in 1999. He says he resigned under pressure brought to bear by Dr Pell, who was then Melbourne’s Catholic leader (Gibson, 2005).

One hopes that George Pell and Julian Ahern could agree on at least one thing: that their views reflect different perspectives on power and knowledge, and that critical literacy would serve both equally well as they attempt to counter each other’s claims.

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