Critical pedagogy and teaching management in university: examining the possibilities and limitations

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Abstract

This paper asks to what extent is it possible to teach management in a university setting using critical pedagogy? This is a relevant question for consideration by academics who take a critical perspective on management for at least three reasons. Firstly, many of us who embrace critical management theory would like our teaching to be as congruent with a critical perspective as possible. Secondly, reflection on the potential for critical pedagogy in a university environment and observation of the impediments to use, offer opportunities for improving understanding educational organisations from a critical perspective. Thirdly, a critical perspective on management presents some special pedagogic considerations when the context of the teaching is concerned with providing students with practical management skills.

We have taken as our starting point for this paper an outline of the basic tenets of critical pedagogy and the, now classic, ‘refutation’ by Ellsworth of the possibilities for critical pedagogy in universities, (Ellsworth, 1989). Ellsworth’s critique provides a useful starting point because in reviewing her contentions, it is possible to dispose of some of the simpler objections to critical pedagogy and some basic errors in argument and analysis. Ellsworth’s interpretation of the philosophy and practice of critical pedagogy will be contrasted with other interpretations offered by those writing about cultural aspects of applying critical pedagogy in the United States, for example, Heaney (1995) and those offering primarily practical guidance concerning the use of critical pedagogy, for example, Hope and Timmel (1997).

The second part of the paper presents case studies from the experience of designing and teaching administration and management to youth and community work students enrolled in Bachelor’s degrees in Community and Youth Work and in Youth Work Studies. Discussion of these case studies will focus on identifying three different
types of issues concerning critical pedagogy and the teaching of management in universities. Firstly, we examine how both the nature of the immediate context and the broader culture shape and limit the possibilities for teaching, learning and curriculum in our circumstances. Secondly we discuss how the curriculum is shaped by the needs of students to be able to survive as first tier managers in environments that may be entrenched in managerial ideology and unaware of, or unsympathetic to, alternative perspectives. Thirdly, we reflect on how, as university teachers, our teaching is influenced by critical pedagogy and how we cope with the tensions and contradictions in our roles in a university context, in this culture, place and time.

We conclude that factors derived from culture and context prevent the principles of critical pedagogy from being fully implemented in our university environment in Australia, but that critical pedagogy can inform decisions made about the teaching of management to students in a university setting and that critical management perspectives are also in raising critical awareness of hidden assumptions implicit in most practical management text. We do not concur with Ellsworth’s conclusion that the inability to fully or successfully implement critical pedagogy in a university environment necessitates the conclusion that critical pedagogy is therefore flawed. Instead, we believe that the failure to implement critical pedagogy in universities invites academics to direct their activism towards the cultural context in which universities exist, the culture and values that inform university education and the structural limitations within the organisation that shape curriculum and learning within universities as they are currently conceived.

References

