Ethical Dilemmas Of Transformative Pedagogy
In Critical Management Education

Stream 20: Activism and Teaching

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Abstract: Within the tradition of critical pedagogy promoting transformation, ethical issues have been raised that deserve consideration by critical management educators. Three issues in particular are identified here: the positionality of the critical educator, fragmentation of student subjectivities, and fundamental contradictions between management practice and critical teachings. These are explored in terms of pedagogical response that sustains critical intent alongside respect for student needs.

Critical management education is here understood to promote, within management practices, the intent of critical theory: “to challenge the legitimacy and counter the development of oppressive institutions and practices . . . [seeking] to highlight, nurture and promote the potential of human consciousness to reflect critically upon such practices” (Alvesson and Wilmott, 1996, p. 13). The tradition of critical pedagogy, well-established in adult education literature and practice, shares this intent and promotes it through various Habermasian, Marxist, Freirian, feminist and post-structural perspectives. When advanced in a liberatory pedagogic frame, these perspectives share one common commitment: personal and societal transformation towards more just, free and equitable conditions through an integrative combination of critical analysis and collective action. In the context of management education, this transformation is particularly directed towards challenging the power relations within which individuals are inscribed, including their own subjectivity.

However the ways to conceive these power relations are much contested, mirroring the fragmentation of the social sciences more generally. Fournier and Grey (2000) offer a three-point summary of CMS intents that cut across varying ideological commitments and pedagogical philosophies within critical theory. While all three are rather cautiously limited to question-raising, I have found them useful as a starting point for conceptualizing critical education for managers.

- **Anti-performativity** is the first, questioning the alignment between knowledge, truth and efficiency. This is key because “non-critical management study is governed by the principle of performativity which serves to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency” (p. 17).
- **De-naturalizing** mainstream management theory, and mainstream understandings of existing social and organizational arrangements, division of labor, and management authority as natural and inevitable.
- **Reflexivity** which, when exercised continually by critically-educated managers, may help germinate more liberating practices and more widespread critical cultural analyses of existing conditions.

Talk of “transformation” may be unsettling for some critical management educators. Some may prefer to confine critical pedagogy to analytic activities developing critical thinking capacities. However in the tradition of critical pedagogy “learning” is a process through which personal and group consciousness is transfigured to unveil a world of oppression; through praxis, learners commit to its reform. Without this personal and social transformation, there is no authentic project promoting equity, economic democracy, ecological sustainability and humanization in workplace organizations or other social spaces. The well-known dialectic of both reflection and action in critical pedagogy affirms the mutual dependency of these processes in transformative learning. Without productive engagement in action, analysis is hollow and circular; without reflective critical analysis, action is empty activism.

 Debates about how to foster this action-reflection dynamic in formal education contexts highlight important problems of authenticity, efficacy and justifiability of adopting emancipatory purposes and transformative learning practices in management education. Alongside these contested political, philosophical and pedagogical positions, important ethical issues arise for teachers. Ethical action, from a nonconsequentialist perspective, respects the dignity and rights of each individual. In teaching, the responsibility is arguably balancing justice with an ethic of care. Thus the ethical burden is ensuring the maximum learning benefit possible for the greatest number of students while honoring individuals’ needs and protecting them from unnecessary harm. Inevitable conflicts arise where different students’ interests, learning and rights may be at odds, or where students’ interests may not conform to institutional or organizational interests. Further, students are vulnerable: teachers occupy powerful positions in relationships and knowledge production in the classroom, and carry fiduciary or protective obligations to their students. These dynamics are arguably heightened in the ethics of critical education, focusing scrutiny on teachers’ authority and influence in classroom activity and knowledge legitimation. I have chosen three ethical issues to address in the following sections, each of which deserve consideration in critical management education.
The positionality of the critical educator

A first ethical dilemma is related to the potentially imposing position of the critical educator, creating its own oppression of learners. This issue is now commonplace within critical circles, for as Alvesson and Deetz (1996) point out, “the irony of an advocate of greater equality pronouncing what others should want or how they should perceive the world ‘better’ is not lost on either dominant or dominated groups” (p. 195). Feminist educators in particular have pointed out the patriarchal relations that are reproduced in some prescriptions for critical education. The dilemma is caused by fostering transformation: how can an educator ethically justify such radical intervention in others’ beliefs, identities, and values? Furthermore, what views can be tolerated? How can a posture of critique be adopted that is not also somewhat despotic, intolerant of intolerance, and therefore controlling?

The temptation to take up a hero-rescuer role may be difficult to resist, especially when one teaches those who have been schooled in dominant management orthodoxies, unitarist agendas, economic frameworks or limited portrayals of organizational dynamics. The call to educators to awaken colonized minds and emancipate critical consciousness is historically rampant in critical pedagogy literature. To learners, the resulting evangelization may appear absurd, deranged or even dangerous. Further, zealous emancipatory educators may bracket themselves out of their critique, establishing a new totalizing hegemony that simply reverses the knowledge hierarchy it presumes to interrupt. A polarity is often created between self-righteous academy-based critique and the orthodoxies of practice in the ‘real-world’. Finally, and this was Elizabeth Ellsworth’s argument fifteen years ago, the so-called dialogic process of critical education itself contains significant repressive potential, with its assumptions that ‘democratic spaces’ for ‘voice’ can actually be created within heterogeneous groups marbled with complex power relations and conflicting interests, simply by pronouncing it so.

Fragmentation of students’ subjectivities

Our second ethical dilemma is related to learners’ torn identities. As critical management educators we are typically not working with the oppressed poor or working classes whose experiences historically have formed the seeds of resistant action. Our students usually enjoy significant social privilege and cultural capital. They have resources to access formal education, and have formulated interests in becoming managers of others within existing organizations. Thus they are unlikely to nurture aspirations for leading revolutionary social change, else they would have pursued careers in less mainstream occupations. Their desires and identities may reflect middle class circumstances and ideologies, conforming more to dominant neo-liberal capitalist culture and prevailing (white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, scientistic) traditions of management than aligning themselves with alternative, resist tant or marginalized cultures.

To engage such students in modes of critique that attack their dominant positions without enabling them to construct alternate subject positions is to risk their cultural displacement, alienation and disillusionment. Backlash can be aroused when students find themselves cornered like this, facing a sort of public shame with only vague opportunity for redress and reconciliation. Some feel compelled to defend their own investments and identities. Fay (1992) argues that the conventional conceptualization of critical education as suffering → critical reflection → emancipation ignores how contemporary social order becomes embedded in our bodies: it is reflected in our addictions, medications and fetishes. The natural impulse is to cling to and defend this world rather than leaping out to an uncertain and threatening project of transforming it. In the context of management education, this is akin to developing students’ critical acuity in deconstructing their positionality in workplace discourses and dynamics without enabling them to advance positive visions and constructive alternatives for their identities and practices in management.

Contradictions between management practice and critical teachings

A third ethical dilemma facing critical management educators is related to the simplicity of some critical analyses, which may not begin to capture the complexity that students perceive unfolding either in the classroom or in contemporary organizations in which they will practice. Dualities (worker/manager, reflection/experience, individual/organizational) are perpetuated in critical pedagogy orientations that cut the world into fixed positions of oppressed and oppressor. Rational ideology critique and development of a critical consciousness are exalted as the salvation. Critical theory also tends to present a highly problematic notion of the self-determined individual empowered to revolutionize society. Left aside are more complex understandings of plural subjects integrated more fluidly to their environments, discourses and knowledge. And as feminist
critiques have pointed out, the reification of reasoned critical analysis ignores emotion and intuition, and ignores how socio-logic is often embodied in ways unassailable through rational reflection (Michelson, 1996; Tisdell, 1998). The ethical dimension of this issue enters when learners’ own experiences are marginalized, or when the power relations of the classroom assign privilege to particular (rational, coherent) voices and knowledge. Critical education that presumes to shoehorn learners’ heterogeneous and multi-intersected subjectivities into such fixed delineations, or provide students with simplistic essentialized analyses of management/worker divisions, is not only impractical but could be argued to be pedagogically unethical.

Furthermore, there remain deep unresolved contradictions of management practice and critical pedagogy. In relation to work and workplaces, critical theory is fundamentally radical, advocating human emancipation through dismantling current systems of ideology, control and production that are embedded in globalized capitalism. The field of management study and practice is fundamentally conservative, upholding existing systems, ensuring organizational survival and profitability, safeguarding shareholder interests and controlling the productive capacity of workers. Within critical pedagogy there is debate over the focus, extent and forms of transformation, but societal transformation itself is not up for question. However in critical management studies, the reconciliation of the transformative impulse with the actual practice of management, where the action of a critical consciousness must be realized to achieve any sort of personal coherence and integrity, is still elusive.

An adequate solution to this contradiction has not yet been theorized, although CMS writers continue to both assert its presence and advance ideas for establishing a critical approach to management. As Alvesson and Willmott (1996) point out, emancipation can cause loss of productive capacity (because domination can expand productive capacity), and motivate actions not valued by dominant norms: “People might have persuasive reasons for refusing emancipatory invitations, including both fear of failure and fear of the effects of ‘successful’ emancipation” (p. 174). Supervisors can take punitive action against those who do not conform to core values and procedures. Management students are preparing for work contexts that are highly competitive, overwhelmingly complex and bewildering, where they expect to be evaluated rigorously according to dominant notions of strategy and success. Arguably, many of them long above all for mastery and control or at least some sense of competence and strategy in everyday work. Against this, critical disciples may appear pathetically unsuccessful to our students, a collection of outdated Marxist refugees or hopelessly inactive academics comfortably drawing tenured salary within bureaucracies. How can critical management educators ethically justify engaging learners in an orientation which may be impossible to enact in existing structures of practice?

**Classroom Responses – Working Through Dilemmas**

Tidy solutions elude the tensions within these ethical issues, but there may be ways to reconfigure and work through them. The following analysis arose from my efforts to create occasions of critical education. My own practice includes teaching graduate courses in leadership, workplace learning and organizational change to educational administrators and to private and public-sector managers in western Canada. Most of these students are mid-career, and therefore bring with them years of professional experience in large organizations (hospitals, colleges, provincial government departments, emergency services, schools and school districts). As such, these people often come to management education having formed clear ideas about what they believe to be the significant problems facing organizations and leaders. Their understandings appear deeply rooted in the complexities of particular contexts. Most describe their role as serving these systems, not questioning their fundamental structures.

Towards a critical education that weds theoretical analysis with action, I have drawn upon the critical pragmatism suggested by Brookfield (2001, 2002), as well as insights from feminist post-structural pedagogy (i.e. Tisdell, 1998). For political affirmation in critical education I have found inspiration among those who have adapted an authentic Freirian pedagogy for higher education (i.e. Allman, 2001). My own classroom responses offer little more than insight into one educator’s dilemmas in working with management students, but these may offer points of resonance for others struggling with ethical issues in critical education. Three approaches I have tried are described: taking up critical positionality and modeling reflexivity as an educator; beginning and ending with students’ experiences; and practicing management in critical orientations. By no means should it be assumed that these are prescriptive or unproblematic. The central intent of the following discussion is to portray my own ongoing struggles with the contradictions and uncertainties of critical education practiced in a management context.

**Taking Up Critical Positionality, Modelling Reflexivity**
A difficult task that we confront as critical educators is determining the extent to which we will take up the positionality of critical teacher. As Brookfield (2002) explains, in conventional terms of critical pedagogy the educator is not a bland facilitator, modeling happy tolerance of multiple perspectives and ‘co-creating’ knowledge alongside learners. Instead, it is assumed that educators do have superior vision: “those lucky enough to have access to knowledge and information have commitment to use their knowledge to help men and women realize and enjoy their truly human capabilities” (p. 273). Most learners’ experiences are presumed falsely concrete, focused chiefly on acquisitive pursuit of material luxuries via instrumental action, and unaware of how difference is repressed and inequity flourishes. The educator’s ethical responsibility is to create conditions that prompt learners to recognize how our perceptions and constructions of experiences have been colonized by dominant languages and norms.

For many of us, such a posture is unappealingly hierarchical and totalitarian. If we are sympathetic to critical postmodern perspectives teaching that knowledge is partial and provisional, subjects decentered and emergent, and action collectively and contingently performed, we may balk at focusing upon ideological critique. But if the radical view is simply presented alongside other views, argues Brookfield (2002) and others, it is likely to be dismissed as irrelevant. This is because the world is still being viewed from within our conditioned frames of dominant capitalist White /heterosexual/patriarchal ideologies. Or the radical view is domesticated, which is the ‘repressive tolerance’ that Marcuse warned against, according to Brookfield. An apparently tolerant embrace of diversity of perspectives can be coopted and controlled so that it ends up legitimizing the domination and repression it seeks to challenge. Thus, tolerance of intolerable ideologies and practices marginalizes truly liberating perspectives.

In my own graduate management classes, I at first tried presenting critical perspectives as one unit of the curriculum. This way, I thought, I could engage learners in a variety of theoretical frameworks for organization and leadership without elevating any particular ideology. But while many learners appeared quite enthusiastic about the new questions and insights opened by critical writings, and could argue these richly in their personal assignments, their small group discussions of cases tended to slide into conventional analyses. For example, when discussing stories from their organizational practice, students often negatively characterized the marginalized or resistant voices in their workplaces as evading work, making excuses for poor performance, or demonizing others to escape responsibility. Their suggested ‘solutions’ for these ‘problems’ tended to draw upon accepted practices that reinforce existing power structures: disciplinary performance appraisals, providing remedial training for problem individuals, etc. In other words, the stance of ‘critically reading the world’ appeared to evaporate rather quickly. Later in the course, when we moved on to units representing other perspectives, I found it difficult to reinvigorate deconstructive analysis considering issues of power, equity, and interests.

Part of this outcome no doubt reflected thoughtful resistance or reluctance by some students to take up a radical perspective, or a deliberate choice to situate themselves in more conservative positions. But more frequently, the case appeared to be students committed to critical perspectives who were unable to sustain these. Partly this failure may have been due to the ubiquitous and powerful popular management texts and media voices surrounding students that fortify apolitical, acritical and unitarist management agendas. But part certainly is the need for greater immersion in and practice with critical readings of the apparently inevitable and powerful bastions of the workplace world. I became convinced that such immersion cannot be served by one critical unit in a course. As Brookfield (2002) has argued, as soon as the dominant ideology is voiced in educational courses, nothing appears able to disarm it. This point is so important that it is worth quoting his further development of it:

> As long as the dominant, mainstream perspective is included as one of several possible options for study, its presence inevitably overshadows the minority ones, which will always be perceived as alternatives, as others. . . Radical meanings are neutered because our previous ideological conditioning means they are subtly framed as the expressions of obviously weird minority opinion . . . newly included voices, sensibilities and traditions are always positioned as the exotic other. (p. 275-76).

Now I try to frame entire courses within critical perspectives. Dimensions of voice, positionality, and the politics of knowledge legitimation are raised about every text and perspective that we examine. The critical perspective thus is not presented as ideological content, but as a tool for exposing and assessing the ideologies implicit in all voices, including those presenting themselves as neutral or all-inclusive and tolerant, and especially including itself.
So how is the educator’s position as zealous emancipator mediated ethically in this approach? A feminist poststructural approach (Tisdell, 1998) focuses on reflexivity. That is, the reflexive critique of voice, positionality and knowledge is refracted on to the classroom activities and procedures whenever possible. In particular, one’s position as instructor is foregrounded. My own and the learners’ shifting identities, and the differences among us due to our genders, races, backgrounds and shifting social positions, are questioned in terms of how we teach and learn together. The assumptions we make about knowledge authority and the power we ascribe to procedural norms (such as grades) are questioned continually. I try to guide class discussions, when appropriate, to explore the connections between who we are as individuals and the structural systems of privilege and oppression that partially inform how we think, how we learn and manage and construct knowledge on an individual level. An important aspect of such discussions is pausing to examine critically what is happening in this particular class – who is speaking, what we are thinking as we listen, and how we are influencing or constraining one another.

An obvious dilemma here is the limitation of rational consciousness in critically discerning the dynamics we are enacting together, embedded as we all are in the very discourses that structure our classroom interactions and respective identities. Another ongoing dilemma is balancing these intentions with students’ levels of awareness and readiness, identity investments and other needs. And a continuous struggle as teacher in such activity is balancing the reflexive and deconstructive posture with the connection-making and forward movement demanded by both institutional curricula and students’ expectations. To a certain extent these dilemmas can only be worked through class by class, beginning and ending with students’ individual experiences. But the core stance of criticality and foregrounding this positionality for me remains unequivocal.

**Beginning and ending with students’ experiences**

Just as Freire and many others have emphasized, a critical consciousness works from the inside out. Personal change begins with students’ own experiences of oppression – and everyone has experienced oppression – naming these and analysing them in ways that link their origins to social structures and orders of discourse. The important note is balancing deconstructive critique with hopeful reconstruction of alternate visions, with an eye to Grey and Willmott’s (2001) caution about avoiding negativism. These visions need to be formulated as authentic alternatives, not illusory transformations that in effect do nothing to challenge existing conditions and relations except to proclaim empowerment and democratic improvement.

In terms of critical analysis based on students’ experiences, I have found management students particularly receptive in two areas. The first area includes management guru texts, for which many students had experienced gut-level suspicion or even disgust that they stealthily concealed in work environments where banal pop leadership wisdom was hegemonic. The second area includes the oppressive discourses and practices constituting their own organizations. Many had tacitly accepted these as part of the ubiquitous politics of organizational life.

I found that tools of critical cultural analysis for these different experiences are especially welcomed by students. We start with their stories – of inequity, frustration, and acts of resistance. They may tell tales of habitual organizational situations negatively affecting their work, like ineffective communication chains, territorial bottlenecks, or petty-tyrant bosses. Stories of their own work pressures often centre on issues of information clutter, performance measures, innovation anxiety, or spiraling expectations. Students also narrate their observations of organizational inequities, perhaps along lines of social markers such as class, race, sex and gender differences, dis/ability, faith orientation, appearance, or age. These stories are analysed beyond micro-terms of individual personalities or simple cause-effect relations to examine organizational structures (reward mechanisms, knowledge most valued, activities dependent on perpetual disablers), as well as larger cultural discourses and accepted imperatives (knowledge economy, human capital theory, globalization, continuous change and innovation). Students have also experienced technologies of self, encouraging their own regulation of particular identities and knowledges. When we name these technologies, students appear to have little difficulty identifying the oppressive effects (and their own complicit implication in these) afforded by performance appraisals, classification schemes, ‘confessional’ dialogues, and certain training/development initiatives. The pedagogy combines their story-telling with critical analytic tools (ways of examining discourses, historical emergence of normalized practices, exclusions, implicit ideologies, and naturalized inevitabilities).

Dialogue in small groups and plenary is key for this analysis of personal experience. However I have found that, especially with groups new to critical discourses, dialogue needs frequent critical mediation. There are always
voices, sometimes very loud or aggressive ones, espousing dominant epistemologies or even discriminatory sentiments. There are also those students who have difficulty imagining or accepting human experiences other than their own, who may in fact denounce the existence or importance of such experience. Brookfield (2002) reminds us that in some cases, such students may be simply performing identities which are usually rewarded within the context of dominant cultural codes governing classroom dialogue.

This is where the politics of classroom life can become oppressive. So-called marginalized voices, while vital for their testimonies of personal experiences that can truly awaken certain students to others’ pain, can feel thoroughly alienated in classroom discussion. Thus mediation is important, in the form of both problem-posing and championing alternate voices that may feel too timid or threatened to enter the dialogue. However, the flip side of such ‘inclusive’ pedagogy is that ‘other’ views or unheard voices targeted for inclusion are produced as weak, helpless and naturally deficit, given power only by virtue of the gaze and action of the champion who includes them. Everything needs to be returned again to interrupting the apparent inevitability and hidden oppression, where it exists, of existing practices and naturalized beliefs.

But problematizing students’ personal experiences of privilege can, as discussed earlier, simply arouse defensiveness or shame. And doing this publicly is not ethically justifiable for any educative reason. If the dialogue cannot be guided to outraged students’ own experiences of unfairness and oppression, then I move to short written texts for analysis. Examples abound in newspaper editorials, business magazine articles and advertisements, government position papers, CEO’s speeches, or excerpts from popular management texts. Most students have little difficulty identifying the exclusions and mobilizing values laced through the rhetoric and imagery of such texts. After we have analysed these collectively, I might encourage students to conduct a critical reading of something closer to home, such as a policy statement, practice, or commonly used term in their own organization. In these we analyse the ideologies and their beneficiaries, their actual effects on a variety of dominant and non-dominant groups in the organization, the historical construction of these texts and their supporting ideologies, and their ways of enlisting participants’ compliance.

Then returning to personal experience of incidents where students felt anxious, disempowered, furious, or betrayed, we can analyse together the historical, political and social forces constituting the situation. Together we also might identify strategies employed in dominant management discourses to deflect such macro-analysis away from existing systems and onto the individual’s deficit, demanding increased individual competence, attitude adjustment, or re-alignment with organizational prerogatives. Some students still may have difficulty problematizing their own workplace structures and practices in terms of what they do and why, but most can engage with a problematization of what they have experienced as done to them.

A dilemma here is the easy passage into simple blaming, as if a single someone or something has caused a student’s organizational experience of unfairness or frustration. At this level of perceiving simple interpersonal cause-effect reactions, the structural inequities and complex power relations remain unchallenged. As facilitator I feel a need to keep moving the analysis outwards, to examine the interacting systems of conflicting forces and activities out of which certain effects emerge. Another dilemma is settling so comfortably into critical analysis of these experiences that, ironically, their structures become reified as inevitable and the analysis dissolves into complaining without agency. Again, as facilitator I try to keep unsettling the constructions and interrogating the claims and dualisms that arise in the classroom (i.e. worker/manager, problem/solution, productivity/resistance, mainstream/radical). The general movement needs to be towards action, involving students in experiments to devise a critical practice of management.

**Practicing management in (critical) theory**

Perhaps the most central principle in critical education historically has been praxis: the dialectic of action and reflection. Action is particularly important for management studies: after all, our students are preparing not for careers of inquiry, but for the difficult work of enacting change in what Beck (1992) has described as the risk society: conditions of uncertainty, contradiction, and conflict, demanding self-reflexivity. If critical management education is to avoid slipping into elitist armchair radicalism safely insulated within academy walls, and actually help prospective managers not only to internalize radical insights and visions but also to enact them in organizations, practice must be integrated with critical analysis. The dilemma here is threefold. First, in formal contexts of critical management education, authentic praxis may simply be impractical. Second, as discussed earlier, there continues a fundamental theoretical contradiction between managerial and radical objectives. The third point flows from this contradiction: there is concern that radical intent becomes diluted in practice or co-
opted by the soft humanist forces for worker ‘empowerment’ that simply masks worker alignment with organizational agendas. In fact one of the “lines of tension” that Fournier and Grey (2000) have identified emerging in CMS writings over the past decade is the nature of scholarly engagement with practice: while CMS writers argue over whether a pragmatic orientation dilutes critical integrity or whether a purist academic stance is self-righteously elitist and insular, practitioners juggle uncomfortably with both pragmatism and purism.

In addressing similar issues in a critical theory of adult learning, Brookfield (2001) suggests reengaging the ideology critique of critical theory with pragmatism focusing on the experimental improvement of contemporary conditions. His argument is that the latter’s unanticipated contingency and openness to continuous reformulation helps ensure the flexibility and responsiveness of critical practice to its circumstances, such that it neither establishes a new orthodoxy nor neglects its own reflexivity (p. 19). While critics worry that the contexts of practice are inherently conservative or promiscuously eclectic, thus returning us to the problematic possibility of eroding the power and integrity of critical practice, Brookfield asserts that a critical/pragmatism encourages “flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences” (p. 20). In the context of work, these might include democratized production and a workplace reconfigured for freedom and human creativity, constructed through multiple experiments, ways of reflecting, and focuses of critique.

The main point here is that serious engagement of critical management education with work-based practitioners may help sidestep old polarities between realism/relativism or theory/practice. Collins (1991) for example, denounces the separation of theory and practice and advises practitioners to put themselves into practice:

Though an understanding of theoretical constructions is important to any serious vocational endeavor, it is more efficacious to think in terms of engaging thoughtfully with theory and, then, putting ourselves into practice rather than putting theory into practice (1991, p. 47)

As Alvesson and Willmott (1996) have argued, such engagement also helps avoid replacing old dogma with new, representing simplistic iron cage depictions of organizations, or generating broad utopian visions that ignore micro-problems and possibilities persisting in organizations. Boud and Solomon (2002) similarly argue for close linkages of workplace organizations and the academy, pointing to the cross-disciplinary erasure of knowledge borders that is well underway in universities, the blurred, unfixed knowledge positions celebrated by contemporary theorizing and afforded by workplaces, and the workplace nature of the university itself with its own issues of career, individual and organizational development. Furthermore action in real practice environments carries the potential to move away from negative deconstruction towards creative generation of alternative processes. Critical education, urge Gee, Hull and Lankishear (1996), should “advance positive visions and agendas for progressive change” (p. 124), synthesizing from ideal possible worlds while unveiling textual representation of reality and their interest-serving consequences.

What might these ideas look like in action-oriented critical education? One of the most common approaches to critical education debated in both management, labor, and adult education literature are forms of emancipatory or critical action learning (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Foley, 2001). Loosely based on a combination of Freirian-like problem-posing and ‘action learning’ (AL) (where groups learn through collaborative problem-solving processes of naming, analysing, exploring action-based solutions, and critically reflecting), critical AL may hold potential for promoting both individual workers’ critical assessment of oppressive or unfair work conditions, and organizational improvement through action to address these conditions. In graduate education, critical AL projects can be adopted as class field projects, conducted by individual or small groups of students in volunteering organizations. The point is to combine pragmatic action and critical analysis, with an eye to countering naturalized assumptions about what constitutes knowledge or improvement, and who decides. In my experience students study the critical AL approach in class, usually seek out an organizational host from their own contacts, then conduct the project with supporting discussion back in class. Or, they can be encouraged to develop their Master’s research project as critical action learning or participatory action research.

The dilemma is that while critical AL is all very well in hypothesis it can prove naïve in practice, ultimately reinforcing existing powerful interests or further subjugating workers to organizational needs, without assiduous reflexivity. The protocols of action learning were originally formulated to serve organizational purposes of performativity and efficiency, sometimes even employing manipulative techniques akin to workers’ public confession. Valentin (1999) points out that additional challenges are presented in considering critical approaches with workers at lower ends of organizational hierarchies, whose work may be more highly routinized and training opportunities more prescribed. Furthermore, in some organizational environments that are particularly non-conducive to emancipatory projects, managers may invoke punitive measures. So-called
critical AL may, in any of these cases, simply reinforce workers’ coercion without enabling real voice, while keeping them further in the dark about their position in the organization.

This is where the critical classroom environment is particularly important. Students conducting these projects are encouraged to analyse critically the gaps between intention and reality, and the micropolitics at work in playing out of voice, positionality, and knowledge construction. In examples offered by Foley (2001), it is clear that an anti-performative position is important in emancipatory AL. That is, the organizational problem-solving focus of conventional AL needs reversal to emphasize such dimensions as equity, fairness, job conditions, and politics of knowledge legitimation that are embedded in such ‘efficiency’ issues as organizational bottlenecks and communication blockages. The performative thrust that tends to infuse projects once they are underway in the workplace can be deconstructed back in the classroom, examining the triggers, rewards and fears associated with performativity. The critical university class or research supervisor provides support for, as Brookfield (2001) suggests, a flexible and reflexive approach to action learning, through multiple experiments and varying collaborations. With cautious selective use, self-reflexivity and careful attention to traps of performativity or slipping into conventional managerial agendas, writers such as Foley (2001), Valentin (1999) and Willmott (1997) argue that non-elitist versions of emancipatory action learning and other projects are possible and desirable in workplace organizations.

Other writers have offered various suggestions for small, local projects that do not attempt radical transformation of existing structures. For example, Meyerson’s (2001) work on ‘small wins’ and ‘tempered radicalism’ suggests the sorts of transformations that locally-focused critical workplace learning initiatives can produce. She shows how even apparently trivial actions taken in organizations such as wearing a T-shirt sporting an equity message or challenging dysfunctional meeting norms can effectively trouble and eventually change the system. Another practical project is organizational narrative, facilitating the construction of collective stories of a change process being experienced by a group of workers (see Gold and Watson, 2000, for description). Management students can undertake limited versions of this process, with assistance from the critical management class in conducting critical analysis of the change narratives to make assumptions and subversive narratives explicit. A third practice is co-creating alternative scenarios with an organizational group, such as facilitating a search conference. The management class provides a useful space for planning and delimiting such experimental actions, as well as critically reflecting on their processes, outcomes and limitations. Such dialogue also should help sustain individual actors’ critical reflexivity, examining their roles and interpretations in these practices and flexibly adjusting their responses.

These approaches encourage action taken towards alternative visions of social futures combined with critical analysis. While radical, paralleling the anti-performative and de-naturalizing intents recommended by Fournier and Grey (2001), such action is also reflexive. Moreover it is pragmatically conceived, carefully considering constraints and affordances, probable consequences, timing and strategy. The dilemma is in its small-ness. Even Alvesson and Willmott (1996) who recommend “micro emancipations” note that while these may be manageable, such locally-focused actions may not succeed in challenging structures that articulate inequity and oppression: gendered and raced cultures, capitalist organizing principles, or technocratic and performative ideologies.

But ultimately, Brookfield (2001) argues, practice based on critical theory derives validity from the support of its subjects for the philosophical vision within the theory – the extent to which adults, in this case, management students and those people they work with in organizations, believe that the vision captures their hopes and dreams. The point of critical education is to generate a vision of a society that is just, fair and compassionate – a vision of economic democracy, where one person’s humanity may not be realized at the expense of others’ interests (p. 12). Perhaps, then, the learning cannot be verified until the social vision is realized.

Conclusion

Ethical issues are by their very nature contested and open-ended. Many possible perspectives, actions, and moral orientations ensure continuous questioning of any one solution, any single vision. In critical education, perhaps more so than other pedagogical contexts, ethical issues are acute because transformation is the core objective: transformation of individuals’ beliefs, organizational practices, and ultimately social structures. This paper has identified three among many ethical issues attending critical education in management: the positionality of the critical educator, the potential fragmentation of students’ subjectivities, and the continuing apparent contradictions of theory and practice. The discussion has explored pedagogical practices developed in
face of these issues, drawing from classroom experience and related literature. These have included (1) the educator’s commitment to taking up a clear critical positionality while modelling reflexivity; (2) beginning and ending with students’ experiences in classroom analyses and learning activities; and (3) integrating the action part of critical education through experiments of practicing management in (critical) theory, both in-class and off-site. These are not presented as solutions but as responses appearing to have productive potential, though fraught with further dilemmas and questions.

Educators committed to the challenges of critical management education presumably expect to continue reflexivity and struggle in their efforts to de-naturalize apparent inevitabilities and promote anti-performativity. But concomitantly we can draw inspiration, I think, from the voluminous writings of critical and feminist pedagogy. In working through ethical issues we would do well to recall principles suggested by Freirian educator Allman (2001). Critical educators, urges Allman, above all need to foster mutual respect in their classes, commitment to helping one another read the world critically and transform hegemonic relations, passion for justice, honesty in process and purposes, and vigilance to these ethical principles.

References


