

Critical Thinking in Sociological Perspective*

In this short article I want to try to make some sense of the apparent (some critics would say obvious) inconsistency between the stated goals and objectives of most schools to create "self-actualized individuals, independent thinkers and decision-makers who will grow up to be responsible citizens," and the virtual absence of conditions in schools which would allow this process to unfold. I also want to address some related questions such as: What is critical thinking? Is it being "taught" now in our schools? If not, why not? What are the societal factors which have contributed to creating the schools that we have now, and given these factors, what are the possibilities for change? And, finally, is there a place for critical thinking in the classroom now? What can we do as educators to encourage critical thinking?

I approach these questions from a sociological perspective as well as from the perspective of an educator. I am not an educational pathologist diagnosing what is wrong with our schools today. My interest is not in assessing blame, but in trying to understand what we have now, and based on that understanding, speculate on what will likely unfold in the near future.

As I entered a private, Catholic elementary school in British Columbia in 1952, Hilda Neatby, a distinguished scholar and professor of History at the University of Saskatchewan was writing a "smashing indictment of modern education in Canada." (from the jacket) This indictment was published in 1953 as *So Little for the Mind*. One of her major criticisms of the new "progressive" experts in education was their unabashed advocacy of critical thinking instruction along with their simplistic and ill-conceived plans for its realization. According to Neatby, these 'experts' didn't practice what they preached. They had no idea what critical thinking was and even less of an idea what to do about it in the classroom. They paid lip service to it. The result was that critical thinking, even as they defined it themselves, never cast even a faint shadow in the classroom.

If we are to believe more recent critics, not much has changed since 1953. In 1971 Ballou Skinner wrote in "The Myth of Teaching for Critical Thinking" in the journal *The Clearing House* : "My observations have shown that most teachers believe that the development of the student's ability to think critically is an important classroom objective, but only a few make special efforts to either teach or evaluate for this development." More recently (1984), John Goodlad in *A Place Called School* , a thorough study of schools in the United States, observes that: "On the one hand, many teachers verbalize the importance of students becoming increasingly independent learners; on the other, most view themselves as needing to be in control of the decision-making process." He follows this up later in the book with this scathing conclusion: "There is in the gap between our highly idealistic goals for schooling in our society and the differentiated opportunities condoned and supported in schools a monstrous

hypocrisy." And with special reference to junior and senior high science teachers Goodlad writes:

"The words *study habits* (or *skills*), *organizing information*, *scientific method*, and *critical thinking* appeared over and over at both junior and senior high levels in what teachers told us. The lists of what they intended their students to learn provided by senior high school teachers were highly repetitive of those provided by junior high teachers, but they were also noticeably more comprehensive. These senior high teachers tended to more often list the subbehaviors involved in critical thinking as well as the parent term...Our observations of classrooms lead me to the conclusion that the gap between the expectations and the teaching practices of most junior and senior high teachers in the sample was formidable."

You don't have to go much farther than the statement of goals for your school and a cursory glance at what goes on in the classroom to confirm Goodlad's conclusion.

What is ironic about all of this is that most teachers, I expect, really do want their students to become more independent learners and to be "self-actualized." So why can't these ideals be translated into classroom practice throughout the school system right now? What **is** happening in our classrooms? Before I address these questions I want to explore briefly the nature of critical thinking itself. It might be interesting to know what it is we aren't teaching!

Like most other terms in the language, there is no easy and straightforward definition of critical thinking. Furthermore, I'm not even sure that the term really fits the set of behaviors we intend it to. I'm not even sure it matters. However, we can begin to gather together significant evidence and draw a tentative map of what it means to think critically.

Ballou Skinner suggests that "A review of the literature reveals that such concepts as 'scientific method,' 'scientific thinking,' 'reflexive thinking,' and 'critical thinking' have the same meaning." She goes on to quote Glaser and Watson who "...viewed critical thinking as a composite of attitudes, knowledge and skills." Some of these were:

- (1) Attitudes of inquiry that involve an ability to recognize the existence of problems and an acceptance of the general need for evidence in support of what is asserted to be true;
- (2) knowledge of the nature of valid inferences, abstractions and generalizations in which the weight or accuracy of different kinds of evidence are logically determined;
- and (3) skills in employing and applying the above attitude and knowledge.

Glaser and Watson even developed a test to assess the extent to which subjects' abilities corresponded to the above requirements. I suppose that their definition is as good as any, but Postman and Weingartner's definition of critical thinking as "crap-detecting" may be more to the liking of some. They are strong advocates of the "inquiry method," and they list the qualities of "good" learners: they are confident, tend to enjoy solving problems,

"...know what is important for their survival," rely on their own judgments, aren't fearful of being wrong, aren't prone to answer prematurely, preferring to gather as much evidence as possible, are flexible, can analyze arguments, don't expect irrevocable answers, and can ask questions.

Defining the conditions under which "good learning" can proceed, Postman and Weingartner (48) maintain that :

We are talking about an environment in which these behaviors can flourish, in which they are the dominant messages of the medium. Obviously, this cannot happen if you 'teach' self-reliance on Monday, enjoyment of problem-solving on Tuesday, and confidence on Wednesday. But neither will you get anywhere by teaching question asking in the sixth grade, observing in the seventh, and generalizing in the eighth.

More decorously, perhaps, but in a very entertaining style nonetheless, Johnson and Blair in *Logical Self-Defense* propose that developing critical thinking is really learning logical self-defense.

As closely as I can, or care to, define it, critical thinking is the ability to dissect arguments, propositions and statements into their component parts using the inquiry method, tracing their origins, evaluating the evidence presented to support them and determining what is reasonable to believe (at least tentatively). If we aren't encouraging people to do this in our classrooms - and there is a great deal of evidence that, in fact, we aren't - then why not, and what are we doing?

Some critics suggest that it is virtually impossible in the classroom under ordinary circumstances to learn critical thinking. Postman and Weingartner write (This is a long quotation, but so to the point that I couldn't resist including the whole thing.):

Let us remind you, for a moment, of the process that characterizes school environments: what students are restricted to...is the process of memorizing (partly and temporarily) somebody else's answers to somebody else's questions. It is staggering to consider the implications of this fact. The most important intellectual ability man has yet developed - the art and science of asking questions - is not taught in school! Moreover, it is not "taught" in the most devastating way possible: by arranging the environment so that significant question asking is not valued. It is doubtful if you can think of many schools that include question asking, or methods of inquiry, as part of their curriculum. But if you knew a hundred that did, there would be little cause for celebration unless the classrooms were arranged so that students could *do* question asking; not talk about it, read about it, be told about it. Asking questions is behavior. If you don't do it, you don't learn it. It really is as simple as that.

So, what passes for education in school is largely the memorizing of facts, procedures, ideas, that are usually presented in textbooks as truth. The authority of the

textbook, the teacher and the program is absolute and not to be questioned. Furthermore, as Goodlad notes:

The emphasis on facts and the recall of facts in quizzes demonstrates not just the difficulty of teaching and testing for more fundamental understanding but the probability, supported by our data, that most teachers simply do not know how to teach for higher levels of thinking - e.g., applying and evaluating scientific principles. This should not surprise us. Their own teachers, for the most part, probably did not know how to do this either.

Besides, people will have some difficulty developing critical thinking skills if they aren't allowed to ask questions in the classroom. In this regard Goodlad believes that:

Students rarely turn things around by asking the questions. Nor do teachers often give students a chance to romp with an open-ended question such as 'What are your views on the quality of television?' The intellectual terrain is laid out by the teacher. The paths for walking through are largely predetermined by the teacher.

He reports that in American schools (and given the evidence, the same is true of Canadian schools) 75% of class time is spent on full-frontal instruction and 70% of that is with "talk" - usually by the teacher to the students. It's difficult to develop critical thinking skills when you can't get a word in edgewise.

In summary, then, three of the main reasons that critical thinking is not learned in our classrooms are that they aren't organized for it, teachers aren't trained in how to facilitate critical thinking and they feel that they must control the learning environment to get the facts across. You'll note that these reasons relate largely to classroom dynamics. There is a whole range of other reasons not directly related to the classroom, but ultimately probably more determinative of what happens in the classroom than anything else.

Being more sociological here for a moment, I would suggest that there is precious little in the way of critical thinking that goes on anywhere in the world today...so why should we expect it in our classrooms? It doesn't surprise me that Goodlad writes that "There is at present no strong pressure to change the ways schools conduct the business of schooling." There is pressure, but not for the wholesale change that would be required for learning critical thinking in the classroom.

The issue is essentially political (defined as how power is distributed in society). Critical thinking, by definition, questions authority. Most people don't like it when authority comes under scrutiny whether that authority is embodied in teachers, administrators, textbooks, traditions, the Bible, the market, our opinions and arguments, government, the head of the family, etc. We come to love our particular authorities (right or wrong) and don't appreciate it when people attack them. As a matter of fact, we see these attacks as undermining our "immortality-projects" as Ernest Becker defines our most compelling authorities in *Escape From Evil*.

According to Pat Marchak in *Ideological Perspectives on Canada*, the predominant ideology (the authoritative one that we consult to make judgments on just about everything from capital punishment to policy governing recess behavior) in our society conceives of government, business, education, etc., as being relatively independent of each other. They aren't. In fact, the market (dominated by large corporations, protected and promoted by government) and its accompanying business ethos pervade and determine the general nature of all other institutions in our society, including schools. Schools serve the market directly and indirectly (yet never perfectly- but we'll get to that later).

As Alexander Liazos concludes in *Sociology: A Liberating Perspective*, the market inevitably creates a class society and with a class society, inevitable inequality. This inequality is expressed as an occupational hierarchy in our society that schools perpetuate. As Neatby writes: "Experts talk constantly of training for leadership, but their whole system is one of conditioning for servitude." Not surprisingly. Very few jobs require the attributes of leadership. Most require subservience, passivity, obedience and acceptance of the status quo. Liazos observes that there are a few exclusive schools that prepare for leadership, the others train for (what I call) "followship."

In a real sense, it would be contrary to the needs of the current labor market for schools to be training all of our children for leadership roles and for critical thinking. Where would they exercise these leadership qualities and critical thinking skills, except in some contrived and trivial sense in a fast food restaurant kitchen where leadership is defined as adherence to company goals and enthusiastic performance of duty for the personal satisfaction of a job well done and a customer well served? Postman and Weingartner sum up this argument neatly with this comment: "If your goals are to make people more alike, to prepare them to be docile functionaries in some bureaucracy, and to prevent them from being vigorous, self-directed learners, then the standards of most schools are neither high nor low. They are simply apt."

In turn, Goodlad provides a clear link between what occurs in our schools and the needs of the job market with this telling comment: "Students seemed to become more compliant and accepting of the teacher's role as they move upward. They were being socialized into classroom expectations, especially that of accepting the authority of the teacher. The picture that emerges from the data is one of students increasingly conforming, not assuming an increasingly independent decision-making role in their own education." So, students are being socialized in school for their adult role of "employee." The role of teacher in school is simply replaced by the role of "boss" at work.

Incidentally, and ironically, teachers are themselves "employees" of the educational system and of the government which both demand conformity, compliance, etc.. Of course, these demands aren't always met with the hoped for meekness as can be seen in the current round of labor negotiations between school boards and teachers in this province. Students aren't always perfectly socialized either into their future roles. They rebel in various ways. One vehicle they don't have in their dealings with their teachers is

collective bargaining. It might be interesting if they had that right. That might prepare them more properly for future union membership.

Overall, it seems like a pretty grim picture I'm painting here of a society that doesn't want most of its citizens to think critically and of teachers and schools preaching one thing and doing another, preparing students for the dull, boring, repetitive jobs they will likely do for most of their lives by "giving" them a modicum of standardized knowledge and reinforcing "functional" subservient attitudes. Actually, it isn't my intention to make any moral judgments about whether or not this situation is good or bad. Rather, I simply want to trace the sources of power in society and to determine how they affect us (in this case particularly in the classroom). We can only be disappointed if we have certain ideals in mind that we haven't yet lived up to, if we have unrealistic expectations of social institutions, if we value consistency between professed goals, beliefs and behavior or if we espouse utopian fantasies wherein all human beings develop to their full potential.

There is strong evidence that the demands of the market will continue to press upon our educational systems. However, the labor market itself is not static, nor is society as a whole. Power is never evenly spread and there are constant challenges to its concentration. We must recognize as educators, that critical thinking challenges concentrations of power (authority) in their various manifestations (including those in our classrooms) by questioning the arguments that are provided in support of those concentrations of power. We must also recognize the inherently political nature of what we do now in our classrooms in support of the current class structure of our society and its labor market and the equally political process of introducing and nurturing critical thinking in our classrooms.

Is there a place for critical thinking in our classrooms? Most critics agree that there is, but that teachers will have to change. Postman and Weingartner emphasize that: *"There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its center the attitudes of teachers, and it is an illusion to think otherwise."* Perhaps, but some sociologists would argue that at this point there can be no significant innovation in education that doesn't conform broadly at least to the demands of the market.

If you decide to encourage critical thinking in your classroom you will want to keep in mind this commentary by Postman and Weingartner:

Socrates had no story line to communicate and therefore, no syllabus. His teaching was essentially about process, his method, his message. It is indiscreet but necessary to allude to how he ended up. His accusers cannot be faulted. They understood perfectly well the political implications of such a learning environment. *All authorities get nervous when learning is conducted without a syllabus.*

*Sorry I don't have the bibliography here. Can't locate it.

