A Critical Look into Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

In line with postmodern philosophy, critical pedagogy has gained considerable importance and has become a valuable educational goal. The purpose of this study is to dig into the effects of critical pedagogy in a modernist educational system. To this aim, 15 Iranian university students were asked to write down their feelings at the end of a course titled "Philosophy of Education", which was their first encounter with critical theories. The qualitative analysis of the self-narratives revealed 11 themes, which demonstrated both destructive and constructive effects. At the end, implications were given for appropriate placing of critical pedagogy in the educational system.

Key Words: critical pedagogy, postmodernism, educational system, constructive, destructive.

1. Introduction

The postmodern era has encouraged new perspectives towards education. Postmodernism sees the world as contingent, diverse, ungrounded, unstable, indeterminate and is skeptic about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, and the coherence of identities (Eagleton, 1996). The debates in the sociology of education have taken on a postmodern tone (Green, 1994). Postmodernism puts into question the continuing relevance in the 'postmodern' age of education systems which were designed to fit 'modern' purposes, i.e., when "schools served as universalizing institutions, promoting unifying ideals" (Rust, 1991, p. 619). It is argued that education does not fit easily into the postmodern paradigm, since educational theory and practices are founded in the modernist tradition and that postmodernisms' denial of the existence of a natural subject with inherent characteristics and potential contradicts the very basis of educational activity (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Cole, Hill and Rikowski (1997) mention

that postmodernism, as excessive social-theoretical practice, attempts to negate the Enlightenment project, reason, rationality, and any attempts to secure knowledge. Nonetheless, postmodern philosophy has brought its products into the field of education. Concepts such as subjectivism, relativism, pragmatism, and critical theories are now buzzwords in educational studies.

As an offspring of postmodernism, critical theory challenges the tenets of the philosophy of positivism by deconstructing and critiquing the premises of the principles of common sense which guide the daily construction of social interactions (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). The introduction of critical theories into education has brought about the promotion of critical thinking and the establishment of critical pedagogy. The educational trend now is directed towards more critical thinking and avoidance of indoctrination. "Drawing upon aspects of the postmodern moment" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.221), critical pedagogy is seen as an agent of "empowerment", "social emancipation" (Freire, 1970) and "social transformation" (Giroux, 1985). The postmodernists argue that greater choice and pluralism in education empowers students (Green, 1994). Postmodernism emphasizes a functional outlook towards educational institutions, by promoting skills rather than ideals. Skilled performance or competence becomes an important part of the educational agenda (Lyotard, 1979). As stated by Slattery (2006), the postmodern worldview allows educators to envision an alternative way out of the turmoil of contemporary education, and thus "any author, professor, or program that offers students an uncritical master plan for curriculum development is only offering a recipe for disaster" (p.31).

As a result, there has been a substantial literature in favor of critical pedagogy and there has been mostly a positive outlook towards it. However, the outcomes of encouraging critical pedagogy in educational contexts where the infrastructure is based on instructionism and receptive pedagogy have not received much attention. Moreover, the appropriate degree and manner of inoculation of critical theories in these educational settings need much investigation.

The following article sets out to examine the effect of promoting critical thinking and pedagogy in the tertiary level of the Iranian educational context. As stated by

Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008), the educational system in Iran is still in the modern era. Centralization, transmission, and behaviorism are prevalent form the primary years of education through the tertiary level, with students accustomed to didactic teaching and learning. Therefore, launching critical views in higher education courses can bring about noteworthy results. To this purpose, self- narratives of students written after a course based on critical pedagogy principles have been analyzed.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the following, we first present some definitions and ideas regarding critical thinking and pedagogy, and then we introduce some critiques on these important topics.

2.1. Critical Thinking and Pedagogy

Paul (1982) sees critical thinking in the weak sense, as the ability to think critically about positions other than one's own. In the strong sense, it implies the ability to think critically about one's own position, arguments, assumptions, and worldview. According to Ernis (1987, as cited in Bensley, 1998), "critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p.9). On the other hand, McPeck (1981, as cited in Mason, 2008) argues that critical thinking is specific to a particular discipline and depends on the content and epistemology of that discipline. Siegel (1990, as cited in Mason, 2008), conceptualizes critical thinking as having a "reason assessment component" and a "critical attitude component". The former belongs to the skills domain, while the latter is related to dispositions.

Ennis (1985) believes that thought is critical only when a thinker exactly attempts to analyze subjects and to follow valuable evidences, and finally to reach to an intellectual judgment and good results. Critical thinking deals with the opposing views and assumptions and is not biased toward a specific direction in advance (Blair, 2000). It is a constructive and positive process which might be caused by negative as well as positive events and is manifested in an individual's behavior in different ways (Lunney, 2003).

Embedded in the notion of critical thinking, critical pedagogy is a broad field of theory and practice which originates from the modernist perspective of the later Frankfurt School, Freirean pedagogy, postcolonial discourse, as well as postmodernism (Usher & Edwards, 1994). This radical approach to education, calls for an "empowering education" that relates "personal growth to public life by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power inequality and change" (Shor, 1992, p.15).

Freire (1970), the pioneer of critical pedagogy, argued that we should empower classroom participants to critically reflect upon the social land historical conditions that give rise to social inequalities and to question the status quo that keeps them subjugated or marginalized. For Freire (1970), critical pedagogy is concerned with engaging learners in the act of what he calls *conscientizacao* which has been defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p.17).

As the main advocates of a postmodern approach to educational theory, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux deepen and extend critical pedagogy (Green, 1994). According to Giroux and Aronowtiz (1991), students should not accept everything which is remained from their ancestors and should put into question power relations. Critical pedagogy focuses on how to create classroom spaces that challenge students to question assumptions, explicitly recognize power relationships in their analysis of situations, engage with other students in collaborative efforts to critically reflect on the embedded network of relationships, and consider alternatives for transformation of that network (Reynolds, 1997). Although definitions of critical pedagogy differ, there are some commonalities: power must be decentered (e.g., Giroux, 1997), with student and teacher resting on similar epistemological levels, disciplinary boundaries must be crossed (e.g., Barnett, 1997), simple concepts must be problematized to promote a complicated understanding (e.g., Dehler, Welsh, & Lewis, 2001), and an action orientation must be adopted (Raelin, 1999). In critical pedagogy, the process of complication occurs through problematizing, where the interests and agendas of specific people in specific situations are represented and organized around a general conceptual scheme, core idea, or problem (Dehler et al., 2001).

Critical pedagogy concerns itself with the social embeddedness of education and its political character. It recognizes that knowledge is relative and political and that teaching always entails the transfer of some values, therefore, learning should include the learners' personal background, and environmental issues, especially cultural traditions and social practices (Shelton, 2007). According to Burbules and Berk (1999), critical pedagogy is founded on notions such as emancipatory knowledge and communication. Basically, it has "the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is 'not yet'" (Simon,1987, p. 375).

Overall, critical thinking and critical pedagogy use the term 'critical' as a valued educational goal, by urging teachers to help students become more skeptical toward commonly accepted truisms (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Yet, there are some differences between the two concepts. Critical thinking's purpose is to teach learners how to think critically and come to their own conclusions, while critical pedagogy seems to prejudge what those conclusions must be (Burbules & Berk, 1999). The critiques posed on critical pedagogy will illustrate this point.

2.2. Some Critiques on Criticality

One important criticism leveled at critical pedagogy is that the conception of rationality that underlies it is culturally biased in favor of a particular masculine and/or Western way of thinking, and implicitly degraders other modes of thinking (Burbules & Berk, 1999). In this respect, critical pedagogy is accused of being another medium of oppression by excluding voices and issues that other groups bring to educational encounters. It has also been criticized as a pedagogy that stresses theory that is merely capable of criticism without being able to offer directions for action (Blankertz, 1978, as cited in Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999).

Another major criticism launched at critical pedagogy is its critical-theoretical determinism (Simon, 1987; Flores, 2004). Accordingly, normative models of social justice cannot lead to any empowerment. Similarly, Ellsworth (1992) claims that by

replacing one set of preferred knowledge with another, critical pedagogy becomes another medium of receptive knowledge. Ellsworth (1989) turned a critical gaze upon critical pedagogy after her attempt to put critical pedagogic principles into practice. She argued that in critical pedagogy there is the danger of an agenda being established where learners are led to pre-defined goals. Furthermore, critical pedagogy remains at an abstracted level of discourse, since it does not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the complexities and effects of power underlying the notion of giving people a voice. Atkinson (1997) offers critiques on the adoption of critical pedagogy in English language teaching classrooms in particular. The critiques address the reductive character of critical thinking, its cultural inappropriacy for nonnative speakers, its incapacity to be defined as a set of teachable behaviors and the non-transferability of critical thinking skills beyond the instructional context.

The importance given to criticality is not the same all around the world. Explanations have been given to explain why critical thinking performances may be lower among Asian students compared to Western students (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, &Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). The Asian way of information processing can be summarized by three principles: 1) reality is dynamic and changeable; 2) opposing propositions may exist in the same object or event; and 3) everything in life and nature is related (Nisbett et al., 2001). According to Peng and Nisbett, 1999, these three characteristics involved in the Asian way of thinking are incongruent with the formal logical tradition of thinking which is dominant in Western cultures. The educational systems of Asian countries are based on a Confucian model of education. In this line, Asian students are suggested to lack critical evaluation skills and are disconcerted by critical thinking language (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004; Zhang, 1999).

3. Purpose of the Study

Various factors need to be taken into account in implementing critical pedagogy. To the researchers' knowledge, there seems to be no study that explores the effects of promoting critical pedagogy in a modernist and collectivist educational system at the tertiary level of education. The present study aims at discovering the effect of critical

pedagogy on a group of Iranian university students who have never encountered critical theories beforehand. Therefore, the study intends to answer the following question:

- What are the effects of critical pedagogy on university students who have not had previous familiarization with critical theories?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants and Setting

This study was conducted on 15 religious middle-class MA students, studying English Translation (3 males and 12 females, within the age range of 22 to 32) at Ferdowsi University, a public university in Mashhad, Iran. MA students of English translation should pass a course named "Philosophy of Education". This course on philology was the first encounter of these students with philosophy. In this course, the professor taught some materials on Derrida`s, Foucault` s, Said`s, and Freire`s ideas. Students were supposed to read the materials and discuss them in class. All the students of the course participated in the study.

  Since the present study took place in Iran, an overview of the educational system of the country needs to be given to clarify the context. Basic education in Iran consists of five years of primary school, three years of junior high school, and four years of high school. During these twelve years, students are encouraged to memorize textbooks which are the same all around the country. Assessment is product-oriented, demanding accurate transmission of what has been taught in the class to the exam paper given that the focus is on the "right" answer. As stated by (Hashemi et al, 2010), the Iranian education system always tries to accumulate the learner's mind with data and information and make them like computers stored with information. With the domination of a one-size-fits-all policy (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008), teachers are supposed to conform to the set regulations and have no chance of going the extra mile. Therefore, the education system fosters repetition, memorization, and transmission of knowledge, in line with the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), in which students receive and store information issued by the teacher. Thus, students are robbed of the opportunity to have creativity, critical thinking, and transformation.

Entrance to higher education requires taking part in a national entrance exam. This norm-referenced, multiple-choice test, leads to memorization of books and rigid learning of a set of predetermined material. The strict objectivity of the exam leaves no room for promoting critical thinking skills while preparing for it. Instead, it brings about "teaching to the test" and negative washback effects.

University courses do not contribute much in developing critical thinking skills in students, either. Studies done on students at the undergraduate level have demonstrated that the four year educational period does not make much difference in this respect. Mirmowlaei (2003) showed in her study that critical thinking test scores of midwifery students at Tehran University of Medical Sciences did not increase during their education. Eslami (2003) compared three groups of nurses in their ability to think critically. They were freshmen, seniors, and those who work at hospitals. He concluded that total score of freshmen and seniors had no significant difference and the score of the other group was significantly lower. Alipour, Mehrabi, Saeid, & Safarpour (2009) assessed the critical thinking abilities of 60 bachelor students of Payam Nour University in Shiraz, southern Iran and found out that there was no significant difference between the scores of critical thinking among freshman and senior students. Moreover, research done at the graduate level shows that students see themselves and their professors following a behavioristic paradigm, again with critical thinking missing (Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011a, 2011b). It seems that higher education in the country pays little attention to the personal and occupational development of the students (Hamdhaidari, Agahi & Papzan, 2008).

4.2 Procedure

To gather the data, when the course was over, the researchers asked students to write down their feelings about getting familiar with critical theories. Students were to narrate what they felt about these ideas and the types of attitudes they solidified after getting acquainted with these notions. As a qualitative research method, narrative analysis has taken on an important role in the social sciences and educational research aimed at understanding personal experience (Phillion & He, 2007).

To analyze the data, the researchers first tried to pinpoint the major themes found in the self-narratives. The themes were then divided into two categories of constructive and destructive. The findings are reported qualitatively.

5. Results

Table 1: Themes extracted from the students' self-narratives

Effect	Theme	Definition
Destructive	Depression	Feeling unhappy and down
	Confusion	Seeing everything as puzzling and disorderly
	Anxiety	Feeling stress and unrest
	Suspense	Experiencing liminality and being dangling
	Solidifying a negative attitude towards native values	Despising one's traditions, culture and religion
	Highlighting Western ideology	Comparing one's ideology with Western mode of thinking and wishing it were different
Constructive	Empowerment	Feeling active and energetic
	Learning how to think	Putting away surface thinking and learning deep and critical thinking
	Questioning the unquestioned issues	Looking differently at taken-for-granted issues
	Relative thinking	What is good or bad and who defines them?
	Reflecting upon diversity	Recognizing that people are different

As Table 1 demonstrates, 11 themes were extracted, six of which were destructive and five, constructive. The negative effects disclosed by the students, included feelings of unhappiness and dejection: *I feel sad, depressed. I am not happy any more,* regret of having had this course: *I wish I didn`t get familiar with these theories.* Some felt

confused and perplexed, not knowing *what is wrong and what is right,* and *to whom to rely on.* One student wrote: *Constructivism taught me that all people may be right and all people may be wrong.* A smoker remarked smoking more and taking sedatives, due to the anxiety he felt. Another student also expressed *restlessness* and *stress*.

Comments such as *I feel I am not in this world any more, I cannot make a firm decision on what to believe* reflected the students' suspense and mental uncertainty. One student even reported waking up in the middle of the night and hallucinating. Two related themes noticed were developing negative feelings towards home culture and focusing on western culture. One student wrote: *Life here is dark and nonsense. I feel lots of my traditions are nonsensical. I think Islam has tied my hands to think deep,* showing the negative attitude that he had formed towards Iranian customs and religion and one simply stated*: Now I don`t have a good feeling towards my own traditions*. On the other hand, the love for western ideology was conspicuous in sentences such as *I wish I were born into a western culture and raised in that type of life* and *I guess the west has the right way of thinking and dealing with life*. Another student compared Iranian society with Western society in terms of the value given to critical thinking: *Something that occurred to me during the course was the idea that why the idea of critical ideology is not valued in our own culture, but they are valued in the western society.*

Among the positive effects, feelings of empowerment were the most prominent. One student called the course *a thought- provoking and insightful experience*. A comment touched on the participatory nature of the class and how the approach and what the students had gained from the material helped them become active students and have a voice of their own: *All of this helped us to change our point of view and try to be part of new research we can do, in which we are interested. And finally for one hour or two this method of sharing ideas and the professor's supervision and elaboration changed the passive students to the ones who can be active and have something new to say and who learned to be reflective and critical of the outside world.* Some students felt they were no longer meek listeners or compliant followers. The experience had given them the power to decide for themselves: *I now feel nobody can deceive me. I know that those who have power determine the truth. So, I am not the one to accept their truth as they dictate*. Students acknowledged that *the course was a way to critical thinking,* and

that the *class* provided *a good opportunity* for them *to think* and reported learning *the art of reflection, how to think deeply, how to evaluate different ideas*, which displayed the effectiveness of the course in making them critical thinkers. Another point detected was putting into question taken-for -granted issues, which apparently had not happened before: *As a result of the educational system, all the time we used to accept everything that our instructors and teachers told us and stayed silent before them. Apart from education, in our personal lives and also social lives, we accepted some moral standards and values blindly.* Critical theories had taught them to *debunk their old beliefs*, to *deconstruct their past basics* and to *reconstruct their own philosophy of life.* Points were also made to relative thinking, by putting into question standards and absolutes: *These relativistic approaches taught me that we cannot judge people by our own standards because everyone constructs her/his own standards. When there is no absolute, objective criteria how can we judge others? This is scenario of today's courts; some people are punished according to some other's perceptions and standards, is it fair? By "court example", I want to prove that, looking through postmodern theories, the "place of justice" becomes the "place of evil and injustice".* The course had also made the students reflect on the issue of diversity from different aspects: *When we learned that everyone constructs their own reality we respect diversity and individualism. Although, cultural diversity is among the most fascinating things for me, when I generalize the notion to social and civil scenes, I think it is somehow frightening. Imagine the society in which everyone has their own principles. There is no general consensus on matters of morality, civil rights, etc.*

6. Discussion

As already pointed out, the major aim of this study was to determine the effects of getting familiar with the critical issues on a group of students in Iran. In fact, in this study we aimed at examining the effects of introducing a postmodern concept (critical theories) on a modern context (Iran). To this end, the self-narratives of MA students were collected and later analyzed for pinpointing the major themes.

 As the analyses of the self-narratives revealed, the course had given students a new outlook towards life, in both positive and negative ways. As expected, familiarization with critical theories had shaken the students, opened new areas of inquiry in their

minds, and made them develop new emotions and concerns towards themselves and their environment.

Students claimed their thinking turned into a relative one with a concern about diversity. This finding is not surprising in the context of Iran, which is modernist (Pishghadam& Mirzaee, 2008), seeking for uniformity and finding the best ideas and ideals. In such a "centripetal" context, students may want to challenge the unifying "authoritative discourse" and generate their own "internally-persuasive discourse". Being familiar with critical theories encourages the learners to resist the dominant paradigm, leading them to a "centrifugal" discourse, which is based on diversity and disconformity (Bakhtin, 1986).

The concept of relativism is twofold. From one perspective, it encouraged relative thinking and avoidance of absolutism. However, from another perspective it was the main cause of the mental uncertainty the students experienced, leading to hallucinations, smoking, etc, as students reported after being taught that all people may be right and all people may be wrong. As stated by Bernstein (1983), postmodernism brings about a "Cartesian Anxiety", where only the two extremes of certainty or chaos are thought to be possible.

Moreover, by being taught that every one constructs his or her reality, the students became more sensitive to the concept of "individualism". Bearing in mind that the students live in a collective society, based on Hofstede's 1986 classification, we can see that the concept of individualism is not easily taken in by the students. While on the one hand, it makes them recognize the importance of each person's individuality, on the other, it contradicts with the dominant ideology of their environment. Furthermore, students' expression of being able to have an active role in the classroom illustrates the reconfiguration of the imbalance of power between teacher and student in the discourse of empower and dialogue that critical pedagogy promotes (Usher & Edwards, 1994) and acknowledges that the dialectical nature of critical pedagogy allows a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment, not just an arena of indoctrination or instruction (McLaren, 1989).

An important point to be taken into account is the significance of the effects. Many of the destructive effects have a greater weight than the constructive ones. For example, developing a negative attitude towards one's home culture can bring about serious repercussions in a society. It is argued that one of the advantages of critical pedagogy is to raise critical citizens (Giroux, 1997); however, it should not lead to despising one's beliefs, culture, and religion or forming an identity crisis. Thus, the weight of the two themes, i.e. solidifying a negative attitude to home culture and highlighting Western ideology cannot be easily overlooked. As put by Eagleton (1996), postmodernism challenges a system which still needs absolute values, metaphysical foundations and self-identical subjects. These themes also approve the commonly cited criticism on critical pedagogy that it is biased towards Western beliefs, deriding other cultures and modes of thinking (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). Here, the forceful criticism made by some scholars (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1993) about the "rationalistic" nature of critical pedagogy comes into mind. The rationality of Western ideology does not fit in with the more emotionally-oriented Oriental view. It should also be noted that some of the cited constructive effects may have a debilitative side to them, considering the age of the students. For example, deconstructing past beliefs and reconstructing new ones may not be much advantageous for someone who is accustomed to living and thinking in a certain way for so many years.

According to Rikowski and McLaren (2002), the effects of postmodernism are predictable: relativism, nihilism, solipsism, fragmentation, pathos, and hopelessness. Extracts of the self-narratives, pointed out in the results section of this study, bear testimony to the mentioned consequences of postmodern philosophy: *I feel sad and depressed* (pathos and hopelessness), *I feel I'm not in this world anymore* (solipsism), *Life is dark and nonsensical* (nihilism), *There are no absolutes* (relativism). As put by Green (1994), postmodernism can lead to "moral nihilism … and the abandonment of the intellect to the chaos of the contingent" (p.74). The analysis of the narratives in the present study demonstrated the suspense, uncertainty and chaotic feelings that some students experienced after encountering critical theories.

While the ultimate aim of critical pedagogy is emancipation, the results revealed in this study give a rather dualistic view on this issue. Whereas some students reported feeling

empowered by learning to take a more active role in their lives, others became handicapped and perplexed by the new notions critical theories had taught them. Thus, for some, critical pedagogy became a medium of oppression, rather than emancipation. This is in line with the critiques posed on postmodernism in the literature, by which it is argued that a postmodern perspective is too critical and puts everything up for grabs and leaves nothing in its place. As Eagleton (1996) puts it, postmodernism is not a solution, but part of the problem. Similarly, Kvale (1992, p.8) argues that the "most frequent critique of postmodern thought is that it is a rampant relativism, leading to nihilism and social anomie". The results of this study have demonstrated that promoting critical pedagogy in a modernist context may develop citizens who are unable to function well in the society they live.

All in all, this study provides us with some implications. First, since critical pedagogy conforms to the right-time right-place principle, in order to remove the destructive effects, critical pedagogy should become an integrated part of the educational system from the first years of schooling. In other words, students should learn critical thinking and develop the necessary skills throughout an extended period. This way, they will have the chance to gradually absorb critical theories and develop the capacity to apply them constructively in their lives. Second, university professors in modernist contexts should keep in mind that sometimes getting students acquainted with critical issues is like opening a Pandora's box, having detrimental effects on students` lives. Therefore, in introduction of critical theories at school or university the cultural and social issues must be taken into serious consideration. Third, the results of this study suggest that there be a search for finding the best time of making students familiar with critical concepts and issues. Of course the right time cannot be higher education in Asian countries, which are generally run by collective ideologies.

The findings of the present study generated new questions for the study of critical pedagogy which can be addressed in future research. In this study, we did not examine the role of religion on critical thinking, thus another study can investigate the role of this salient factor in religious countries. Moreover, this study was conducted qualitatively; another study can be done quantitatively to triangulate the findings. This

study can also be replicated in other settings such as schools to compare and contrast the results.

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