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[Review of the book: Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher by S. P. Brookfield]

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Stephen P. Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*

Roben Torosyan

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher. By Stephen P. Brookfield. Jossey-Bass, 1995. 320 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0787901318.

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There is a classic Calvin & Hobbes cartoon where Calvin says to his mother, "I read this library book you got me." His mother asks, "What did you think of it?" Calvin replies, "It really made me see things differently. It's given me a lot to think about." His mother says, "I'm glad you enjoyed it." In the last frame, walking away, Calvin remarks, "It's complicating my life. Don't get me any more." That is how I have often felt about the most paradigm-changing ideas or experiences I have gone through: now I am more aware, but with that I am self-aware of my limitations, aware of the limitations of others, aware of the complexity of the world, and it makes thinking more challenging.

Nevertheless, some awareness can cause pain and relief too. In the nearly twenty years since its publication, Stephen Brookfield's book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* has continued to be my single favorite read of all time on teaching (although he breaks new ground in his more recent *Teaching for Critical Thinking*). It took me ten years to finish. But that was because it was so useful. When I first began teaching college, my doctoral mentor at Teachers College Columbia, John Broughton, recommended the book, mentioning that Brookfield had been a protege of his when new to academe. Every few pages I had to stop and try something--use a questionnaire to find out what students found "engaging," "distancing" or "surprising," or ask myself whether making students feel exposed by sitting them in a circle (pp. 9-10), avoid assuming I can be "an unobtrusive observer" (p. 11) and instead reveal my thoughts but judiciously, or rephrase instructions to avoid inadvertently forcing "the mandated confessional" (p. 13) out of students and instead reward their dissent with my very approach. His tools continued to help me for years, whether I taught the psychology of decision making, modern philosophy or the philosophy of education.

"We teach to change the world," as Brookfield opens the book (p. 1). But his point is not that we must invoke massive transformation in students or anywhere else. In fact, he implicitly questions any overly grandiose conceptions when he warns against "assuming the meanings and significance we place on our actions are the ones that students take from them" (p. 1).

Similar to Calvin feeling that having a lot to think about is complicating his life, all my associations with the term “critically reflective” often made me feel either that I was supposed to find flaws gleefully in others’ reasoning, or else feel horribly flawed myself, or both. I also felt I was the dupe if I was caught unaware. Surprisingly, however, Brookfield shows a kinder, gentler side of critical thinking; he argues, “... the habit of critical reflection is crucial for teachers’ survival. Without a critically reflective stance toward what we do, we tend to accept the blame for problems that are not of our own making...A critically reflective stance toward our teaching helps us avoid these traps of demoralization and self-laceration” (pp. 1-2). In fact, he empathizes with the impulse to engage in an “enthusiastic bout of self-flagellation” (p. 234), but suggests instead that what we need to examine critically is less our flaws or even those of others than all manner of assumptions—including those that harm us, the teachers.

Among the tools I reuse every year or so, I have had students complete a version of Brookfield’s “Classroom Critical Incident” (CCI) questionnaire, anonymously, in the last 5-10 minutes of a session:

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.) (p. 115)

In addressing how students complained about class in such questionnaires, Brookfield forces himself to be an example, modeling what he aims for others to do by using his own assumptions and oversights as fodder (this includes when he teaches or facilitates workshops in person). It inspired me. When I first used the CCI, students wrote about one student’s loud disruptions. We related the problem to the class topic of self-direction, captured by concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl’s insight, “between the stimulus and response is...our power to choose our response” (Frankl, 1946/1996, p. 104). I shared my own past trouble controlling my responses and even my own rage, which led me to pursue psychotherapy. Regarding the student complaints, I asked “What should we do?” and when students only referred to what I could do, I kept redirecting attention back to what the group as a whole could do and say. While not much changed in what most students did, the “disruptive” student did communicate dissent more productively, if still awkwardly.

Throughout the book there is a balance of *empathy* and *challenge*. We can critique our “self-lacerating” assumptions, but we also need to work on ourselves for, as he writes, “If we teach what we’re good at and love, it is almost impossible for us to understand, much less empathize with, students who find our subject boring or intimidating. The more we teach something, and the farther we travel from our first experiences of learning it, the easier it is to forget the fears and terrors new learning can provoke” (p. 50). The longer I teach, the harder I find it to remember what it is like not to know what it is that I know (to paraphrase the brilliant Stephen Pinker).

To that end, a tool equally powerful in teaching any “new prep” (first time teaching a particular topic, entire course, redesigned course, etc.) is Brookfield’s “teaching log,” which I completed every week immediately after class my first time teaching. “I suggest you jot down some brief responses to any of the following

questions that seem appropriate” (p. 73), Brookfield recommends, admirably freeing the reader from feeling “I should answer every one of them.” His prompts are:

1. What moment (or moments) this week did I feel most connected, engaged or affirmed as a teacher--when I said to myself “This is what being a teacher is really all about”?
2. What moment (or moments) this week did I feel most disconnected, disengaged, or bored as a teacher--when I said to myself “I’m just going through the motions here”?
3. What was the situation that caused me the greatest anxiety or distress--...[one] I kept replaying in my mind as I was dropping off to sleep, or that caused me to say to myself “I don’t want to go through this again for a while”?
4. What was the event that most took me by surprise--where I saw or did something that shook me up, caught me off guard, knocked me off my stride, gave me a jolt, or made me unexpectedly happy?
5. Of everything I did this week in my teaching, what would I do differently if I had the chance to do it again?
6. What do I feel proudest of in my teaching activities this week? Why? (pp. 73-74)

Most useful to this day has been the fourth question on “What took me by surprise?” Perhaps it’s because the question can make us delve into our learning edge, triggers, hidden confidence needing to be tapped (“Oh, wow, I rolled with that complete change of activity plan”), or sometimes, in Jungian terms, our shadow side or those unconscious assumptions that may only come to awareness subtly or indirectly (“Huh, when I saw that disturbed student’s post I realized I really need to make time even just to skim their pass-fail discussion posts more promptly”). One event that most surprised me was when I asked students debating

each other to “first say back the other’s point to their satisfaction,” but some students ended up hating it. As Brookfield’s book prompted me to reflect on my practice, I realized years later that this listening exercise has often been most effective when I am willing to shift my own teaching plan as events unfolded “live” during discussion, sometimes admitting my own struggles as they arose. For instance, when a student objects to the class activity, I need to remember to stop and ask, “Okay, how many others felt similarly?” And even if only a few share the complaint, I need to ask, “Can someone say back that complaint to that student’s satisfaction?” and, further, I need to say it back myself to prove that I can hold myself to what I’m holding them. A close second in value is the sixth question on “What do I feel proudest of,” which sustains me when I am tired.

Remarkably, Brookfield helps us avoid the “Perfect Ten” syndrome, whereby we assume we are supposed to receive a 10 out of 10 rating of positive feedback. We then focus on the one out of ten students or colleagues who might be dissatisfied with our work. Framed in terms of the way some “ideas...come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural...and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interests” (p. 15), Brookfield reminds us to ask, “Whose interests does the ‘perfect ten’ assumption serve, if not those of students and teachers?” (p. 18). He answers, “Primarily, it serves individuals... who believe...teaching can be reduced to a linear, quantifiable rating system... Believing that learning and teaching are unidimensional...In their minds, teaching becomes the simple implementation of centrally produced curricula and objectives” (p. 18). Yet Brookfield says this not to force us to risk our jobs, but rather to help us alleviate the self-blame we may feel in the face of such norms. I have reminded countless colleagues, distracted by a vociferous student complaint or an angry colleague’s email, to be, if you would, statis-

tically valid and reliable in their self-analysis and attend less to outlier feedback and instead to a fairer analysis.

Implications for our practice abound, as Brookfield shows how even boring or painful experiences can bring great learning. Taking on experiences in graduate education, professional development workshops, and academic conferences, he urges us to not simply judge experiences good or bad, but instead consider, “What made it so positive,” and then has us note “those things that you do in your own teaching that you think might induce the same reaction in your students” (p. 56). And for a negative experience, we can use our own empathy for ourselves to then empathize with our students, as when he suggests we note “what was it that so depressed, annoyed, demeaned, or bored you” and “those things that you do in your own teaching that you think might induce the same reactions in your students” (p. 56). The point of course is to ultimately jot down what people could have done differently and any lessons for your own practice.

The book’s spirit of democracy pervades throughout. For instance, Brookfield recommends putting a “rationale” or “truth-in-advertising statement” in one’s syllabus up front. His takes up two pages of the book (I’ve cut mine over the years to a few sentences), as he makes statements like “the chief class activity... will be a small group analysis of experience,” “a course like this will focus on experience rather than academic theories,” and “evaluation in an experiential seminar like this should focus on the documentation and probing of experience, and should be pass/fail” (pp. 110-111).

Surprisingly, at least in this book, Brookfield leaves unquestioned two major assumptions of his regarding grading and the syllabus schedule. In his rationale, he states, “This syllabus can be changed at a moment’s notice to take account of both your responses to course activities and mine” (p. 111), something I stated for a time in my own. But as I learned from feedback from colleagues and students, this failed to accommodate

students with a strong preference for planning ahead and possible real world challenges that would demand they know of major deadlines and even numbers of pages of reading assigned many weeks ahead of time. Likewise, his rationale states, “If you need a letter grade and don’t feel comfortable receiving a pass or fail grade... you should probably drop this course ASAP. ... I am prepared to write a letter to your employer declaring that a pass grade in this class is equivalent to a letter grade of at least B+, but... I believe that letter grading destroys the collaborative spirit so necessary to the kind of group work you will be doing in this course” (p. 111). I actually share Brookfield’s skepticism of the entire letter grading enterprise, and yet I feel a tension too with the responsibility to be gatekeepers, not simply giving away course credits but actually credentialing our students, and perhaps using letter grades to give some (admittedly rough) sense of what the “real world” reception for their writing, speaking, creative work or other work they produce might be. While this review’s brevity demands I can not articulate the nuances here, I was surprised that Brookfield’s book largely side-stepped any tackling of how faculty whose institutions require that they assign letter grades go about handling the *grading* aspect of evaluation and assessment of learning (for that, I loved Walvoord’s slim and useful book *Effective Grading*, now in its second edition).

As if ordained by Brookfield’s focus in latter chapters on learning from peers, I was actually only able to finish his rich book thanks to a Faculty Learning Community at Fairfield University in 2005-2006 in which we methodically worked through the entirety (some sections for my second, third or fourth time). To help balance the voices in meetings with colleagues, he proposes ideas like the “circular response discussion,” in which a volunteer starts discussion with a two-minute comment, and the person to their left “must begin her remarks by paraphrasing the comments of the first discussant, and then she must show in her contribution

how what she is saying spring from, and is grounded in, the comments of the direct discussant” (p. 150). Ground rules include no interrupting, no speaking out of turn in the circle, a strict two-minute limit on speaking, each must begin by paraphrasing until every discussant has had a turn, at which point the rules are “no longer in force” (p. 150).

Another powerful tool Brookfield demonstrates, and which I have used numerous times, comes in another such latter chapter entitled, “Solving Problems Collaboratively: The Good Practices Audit.” In brief, each person writes about their best and worst experiences as a learner, as a colleague and then as a teacher yourself. The power comes when the group assembles those experiences in two columns, of best vs. worst items, from each lens. I remember this exercise because it helped my team at Fairfield get to know each other so well, personally. One of us, for example, clearly valued talking things out and the other preferred to not have to talk everything out, and we shared what in our experiences led to such preferences.

Like the effect of the entire book, the point of all this critical reflection is that it keeps you questioning your own assumptions, while also questioning those around you lest you only feel targeted or demeaned--to instead work towards fulfillment in one’s practice. I hope others find it as essential as I have. ■■

Frankl, V.E. (1946/1992). *Man’s search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. (4th ed.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Originally published in 1946 as *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager*.)