

CRITICAL THINKING FOR A PLURALISTIC UNIVERSITY

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The Swedish Higher Education Act emphasises the developing of critical thinking skills as a major goal in all academic education (§8, Högskolelagen, law 1992:1434). However, recent reports from Swedish Board of Education show that in the eyes of many teachers and students, university education does relatively little to develop the critical thinking skills of students. This problem is hardly unique for Sweden. For instance, Deanna Kuhn in an extensive empirical survey finds similar problems in American higher education. (Kuhn, 1999.)

The conditions for higher education have changed drastically in the last decades. Widening student recruitment, increasing social and cultural pluralism and more complex demands on the teachers, such as interdisciplinary teamwork and cooperation with the surrounding society, have coincided with drainage of time and resources for university teachers. Many teachers therefore state lack of resources as the major impediment to working with students' critical thinking skills.

But the problem is pedagogical as well as financial. There are certainly well thought-out pedagogical initiatives regarding critical thinking in many areas of the Swedish academic society, both within specialised courses and courses in other subjects. Nevertheless we find indications that training in critical thinking is often neglected, in Sweden as well as internationally.

We suspect that this is in part due to a wide-spread belief, that critical thinking skills cannot be trained separately, but are formed so to speak automatically as by-products in the development of knowledge in other fields. Some even seem to think that critical thinking skills should be left for the students to attain after they have completed their formal educations, so that university courses should comprise only the lower levels of

Benjamin Bloom's knowledge taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating.

Another problematic but seemingly wide-spread view is that critical thinking is equivalent to logical analysis, the identifying of logical fallacies in argumentation, and the correct use of scientific method. A preliminary survey of the Swedish national database on university courses shows that formal and informal logic, argumentation analysis, basic semantics and methodology and philosophy of science are the most common contents of both specialized courses in critical thinking and courses where critical thinking is one objective among others.

In a joint research project, which we are currently planning, we want to challenge both these views. We believe that critical thinking is more than logical reasoning, and we believe that critical thinking skills can and ought to be systematically trained. Pedagogic theories from cognitivism, through constructivism to socio-cultural theories, indicate that critical thinking skills cannot simply be left to evolve by themselves. Logic is doubtless an important ingredient in critical thinking, but it seems to us that the capacity to change viewpoints and study an issue from different perspectives is crucial for critical thinking in an increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural society, and that therefore it should be considered an essential object for higher education to promote that capacity.

We find theoretical and practical inspiration for a pedagogy of multi-perspectival critical thinking in both the rhetorical tradition and in contemporary philosophy: in ancient and renaissance views of rhetoric as means for critical and creative reflection; in the sophistic movement, with its emphasis on the perspective-dependence of knowledge; in so-called ethical particularism, according to which ethical evaluation is radically context-dependent; in the didactic theories that evolved from Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's critical theory; and in theories of interpretation of others as based on empathy, or the imagining of oneself being in the other's position.

The sophistic tradition from Protagoras, Isokrates and Gorgias has recently re-emerged as a potential epistemology (a more correct notion might be »doxology«) (Cassin, 1986; McComiskey, 2002; Mendelson, 2002; Schiappa, 2003; Rosengren, 2003). One of the fundamental sophistic ideas is that we as humans and as individuals are inextricably tied to the idiosyncracies of our senses, shaped by our culture and constrained by our language in ways which make all knowledge situated and context-dependent. While Plato interpreted Protagoras' thesis »Of all things the

measure is Man« as subjectivistic, the sophists themselves most likely drew a different conclusion. The perspective-dependence of all knowledge, they thought, does not prevent the evaluating and validating of views and arguments. However, such evaluations should take many different viewpoints into account. We extend our knowledge through dialogue, by letting our thoughts collide in argumentation with others and with ourselves, thereby widening our repertoire of perspectives for critical examination. Philological studies and close readings of sophistic sources have shown that sophists strived to develop a pedagogy for these ends (Clark, 1957; Jarret, 1969; Mendelson, 2002; Schiappa, 2003). A particularly interesting notion in this regard is the so called »anti-logic« elaborated in *Dissoi logoi*, »opposite opinions«, from approximately 400 B.C. This text by an unknown author elaborates a range of pedagogical tools for fostering the capacity to change and try out different perspectives. The underlying idea is that there are contradictory standpoints for all issues, and that the wisest way to deal with an issue is to examine it with curiosity and thoroughness from as many sides as possible, preferably in argumentation. For every view, the arguments for the opposite view (*anti-logos*) should be examined, and understanding evolves through a dialogue between different views. These ideas on knowledge and language were incorporated into Cicero's and Quintilian's pedagogy, in which *controversia* and argumentation in *utramque partem*, *pro-et contra*, played a vital role, and a critical and creative dialogue where opinions and views could meet was considered necessary, both for developing knowledge and for fostering good human beings and citizens.

Another source of inspiration for a pedagogy of multi-perspectival critical thinking is the rhetorical pedagogy of renaissance humanism. In opposition to the formalized and mechanical logic of the scholastic tradition, the humanists pointed to the classical rhetorical idea of *topoi* as a pragmatic method for heuristic interpretation and critical reflection on ethical and political issues (Jardine, 1974; Mack, 1993). They emphasized the fundamental role of language in creating the human life-sphere, not just as an inert tool, but as a dynamic power (Waswo, 1987), and stressed its situational character. Rudolphus Agricola's and Desiderius Erasmus' teachings offered pedagogical devices for a critical thinking as intellectual abundance, *copia*, and multi-perspectivism (Jardine, 1993; Moss, 1998). Humanists re-vitalized the idea of argumentation in *utramque partem* as a method for analysis and evaluation, and gave a central position in their

pedagogy to the rhetorical and ethical concepts of *prudentia*, »practical wisdom«, and *decorum*, »the appropriate« (Ekedahl, 2003).

Inspired by the sophistic and rhetorical tradition, Giambattista Vico, Emanuel Tesauro, Matteo Peregrini and other 16th century Italian philosophers attempted to deconstruct or transcend the gap between *res* and *verba*, thereby challenging Cartesian and Port Royal teachings. According to Vico, the Cartesian focus on logical analysis threatened to sterilize the students' faculty of creative elucidation and assessment if not accompanied by a pedagogy for perspective shift. Like Tesauro and Peregrini, Vico held that learning arises through analogical thinking, and that what is often thought of as mere figures of style and aesthetic ornamentation in language are in fact essential cognitive devices which structure impressions and concepts in internal and external dialogues.

A third source of inspiration is ethical particularism, a theory of moral epistemology first developed by Jonatan Dancy in *Moral Reasons* (1993). According to ethical relativists, moral reasoning can be well conducted without the applying of ethical principles, and this does not imply relativism (Kihlbom, 2002; Dancy, 2004). Dancy stresses that moral decisions must not assume that morally relevant features have equal relevance in all situations; the latter assumption is the »generalist mistake«. On the contrary, the particularist insists, a feature may count as a »pro« in one case and a »con« in another, and lack moral relevance in a third case, depending on other features of the cases. The clue to rational deliberation is to master use of the moral concepts, i.e. being able to argue that a feature is morally relevant in a case, based on arguments of similarity or contrast, but without appealing to general principles. Ethical particularism, we suggest, may be widened into a more general particularism about critical thinking, which contributes to both the rhetorical epistemology of perspectives and the pedagogy of critical thinking, and which also has consequences for the way we conceive objectivity.

A fourth tradition of ideas, which contributes to our project is so-called simulation or empathy theory in the philosophy of mind and in the philosophical theory of interpretation. (See for instance the contributions in Davies & Stone, 1995a and 1995b and Kögler & Stueber 2000.) Understanding an other human by means of empathy means imagining being in the other's situation – »in his shoes« – and seeing it from his or her perspective. This idea has been important in the hermeneutic tradition, in R. G. Collingwood's theory of historical understanding, and in recent analytical-philosophical debates on the nature of »folk psychology« and

the methodology of interpretation. One of the aims of our project is to deepen the understanding of the ways in which empathetic understanding is perspective-dependent. Drawing on recent truth-theoretical work on the notion of a perspective (Kölbel 2002, and others) and on so-called contrastive explanation theory in the philosophy of science (Bas van Fraassen, 1984, and others) it will be argued that the relation between the perspectives of the interpreter and other determines both what constitutes an adequate explanation or interpretation, and what constitutes an explanatory problem in the first place. Briefly stated, an action or utterance of the other is problematic for an interpreter if, from the perspective of the interpreter, it appears unreasonable, or less than motivated by the circumstances, and explaining it is to show that, everything considered, it was reasonable after all. Some aspects of perspectives are incapable of being true and false, or correct and incorrect, such as objects of comparisons or physical points of view, while others are capable of being true and false, or correct and incorrect, such as background factual and value assumptions. Where background assumptions differ, interpretation becomes in part a matter of integrating, or negotiating the perspectives of the interpreter and the other, and this is in part a matter of self-critical reflection concerning the interpreter's own background assumptions. Thus, interpretation by means of empathy leads to confrontation of incompatible perspectives, which in turn leads to criticism and self-criticism of underlying background assumptions, or presuppositions. As Charles Taylor once put it: »Understanding is inseparable from criticism, but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism.« (Taylor, 1985: 131.)

In our group, we hope to develop these ideas further in our planned research project. We invite anyone interested to contact us for comments and suggestions.

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