

Criticizing With Care and With Respect For What We Are All Up Against

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In the faculty carrels at the University of New Hampshire, a Spanish professor has hung a poster which contains this one sobering sentence: "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." Whenever I read the poster I find myself identifying with its anonymous author. I believe this quotation names an experience common to most if not all philosophers and teachers. Indeed my own experiences of misunderstood meanings have gradually led me to practice what I advocate in my title: "Criticizing With Care and With Respect For What We Are All Up Against."

One arena for hurtful misunderstandings lies at the educational intersection between criticism and nurturance, where the tensions between instructional critique and supportive encouragement run high. In my own teaching, I have wrestled for decades with these tensions between educational nurturance and criticism. As I observed my students, studied, reflected and experimented with alternative approaches, I eventually reached a few conclusions about what seems to help me and my students better handle these ongoing educational tensions. My major conclusion is that the best resolution occurs when the whole class can shift into what I have called a "jointly constituted community of support and inquiry." This Community of Support and Inquiry gets explicitly constructed as an interdependent relational mini-society where all members engage in mutual exchanges of both criticism and nurturance.¹

Simply to present this conclusion, however, or even to present it in detail with reasonings and ramifications cannot convey all the complexities and rich variations entailed in its implementation. For example, Dwight Boyd has rightly emphasized additional considerations, such as the importance of remembering to include, and use, the positive modes of critique, and to avoid possible misleading understandings of criticism as equivalent to no more than some form of "finding fault."² Boyd has also pointed out the inevitable need for relevant detailed knowledge of each student's particular personality, if not personal history.

Although Boyd's observations do remind us of the added demands placed on educators who undertake the formation of such communities of support and inquiry, his suggestions are quite compatible with this endeavor, and make fitting tasks to enhance the chances of creating successful educational communities. More recently, a challenging question of a different order has been raised by Dr. Barbara Applebaum. The question she poses is this: "What about educational criticism where a 'Community of Support and Inquiry' cannot be developed and where it is impractical to expect a teacher to know his/her students individually?"

Let me summarize what I take to be the gist of Dr. Applebaum's argument. She says there are times when educators can neither satisfy my conditions for Commu-

nities of Support and Inquiry nor meet Boyd's conditions for personal knowledge of our students; but the situation still calls for caring criticism. For example, Applebaum feels such criticism to be an urgent, pressing need in the case of anti-racist education. Applebaum's own conclusion is that we can still "criticize with care and respect" if we understand that, among other things, this "may just require that we try not to degrade and try to contribute positively to the other's state of being." She says it also "requires that we take care not to hurt the individual one is criticizing because s/he is a person worthy of our respect."

At first glance Applebaum's requirements that "we try not to degrade" and "not to hurt" may appear to ask considerably less of teachers than either Boyd's or mine. But I want to suggest that meeting Applebaum's requirements may be more difficult than it sounds. Consider an example from Lisa Delpit's book: *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. The following extended quotation comes from Delpit's autobiographical account of her efforts to raise her own awareness about cultural domination in the education of native Alaskan children:

During my first few years in Alaska, I was confused by a statement I heard over and over in many villages. When parents found I really wanted to hear what they had to say, they would tell me in a tone of quiet desperation, "They're making our children into robots." I accepted what they said and tried to be as sympathetic as I could while trying to understand exactly what they meant....It wasn't until I came back to the university and talked to Eliza Jones, a gifted Athabaskan linguist, that I began to understand. Eliza, wise and educated, although not in the formal, schooled sense, told me a story — the Athabaskan way of teaching that I learned to cherish:

A little boy went out with his grandfather and other men to hunt bear. After capturing a bear and placing it in a pit for skinning, the grandfather sent the boy for water to assist in the process. As the boy moved away from the group, his grandfather called after him, "Run, run, the bear is after you!" The boy tensed, started to run, then stopped and calmly continued walking. His grandfather called again, louder, "Run, run I say! This bear is going to catch and eat you!" But the boy continued to walk. When the boy returned with the water, his grandfather was very happy. He had passed the test

The test the boy passed was to disregard the words of another, even those of a knowledgeable and trusted grandfather, if the information presented conflicted with his own perceptions. When children who have been brought up to trust their own observations enter school, they confront teachers, who, in their estimation, act as unbelievable tyrants. From the children's perspective, their teachers attempt to coerce behavior, even in such completely personal decisions as when to go to the bathroom or when to get a drink of water. The bell rings, go to lunch; the lights blink, put your work away, whether you are finished or not. Despite the rhetoric of American education, it does not teach children to be independent, but rather to be dependent on external sources for direction, for truth, for meaning. It trains children both to seek meaning solely from the text and to seek truth outside of their own good sense — concepts that are foreign and dangerous to Alaskan village communities.³

I have recounted Delpit's story in detail because I believe it demonstrates the fact that however well intentioned the Anglo teachers were, they still did not succeed in meeting Applebaum's requirements to "convey respect" toward the Athabaskan children "not to degrade" their "state of being" and "not to hurt" them as individuals.

One conclusion we might draw is that rather than being less stringent or less demanding than the conditions needed for creating communities of support and inquiry, Applebaum's requirements to convey respect, not to degrade, and not to hurt

can be just as difficult to satisfy as mine and Boyd's insofar as they require a crosscultural depth of understanding about what constitutes disrespect, degradation and/or hurt for another person.

But in fairness both to Applebaum's analysis and to the complexity of these issues, there is some further conceptual analysis yet to be done. In order to shorten and simplify this task I shall draw heavily on Maryann Ayim and Barbara Houston's "Conceptual Analysis of Sexism."⁴ Ayim and Houston distinguish three different analyses of sexism, according to whether it is analyzed by: (1) intentions, (2) content, or (3) consequences. If we apply this threefold set of distinctions to situations of racism, and to other forms of dominance, then Applebaum's requirements that we "not degrade" and that we "take care not to hurt" could be met on the level of (1) an intentional analysis. But, as in the case of the Anglo teachers and the Athabaskan children, Applebaum's requirements might not be met when we did either (2) a content or (3) a consequences analysis.

I think Applebaum is right that under certain circumstances the best and perhaps only thing we can do is to criticize with careful and respectful intentions. I agree with Applebaum here because our own intentions are something we can work with in ways that do not readily apply to Ayim and Houston's other two categories of consequences and content. In these two cases, other people's interpretations of content and their experiences of consequences are ultimately beyond our control and may be outside the range of presently accessible knowledge. We can, however, especially in our position as teachers, be alert to our own internal feelings and state of mind, check on our motivation, and work to establish respectful good intentions toward all our students. Thus our intentions are, at least potentially, within our own control. It is true that others can still misinterpret our intentions, but that does not alter the intentions themselves. Furthermore, it has been my own experience that when I am completely well-intentioned toward someone, they can usually sense my good intentions underneath the surface of my mistakes.

In our efforts to alleviate the hurt and harm of racism, sexism, and other forms of dominance, good intentions may sometimes be the only viable place to start. Personally I have found it helpful in my efforts to create communities of support and inquiry to stay alert to my own motivation, to check my intentions and to practice what I have come to call a Respect For What All Of Us Are Up Against. This means that I endeavor to stay open to the facts of each person's suffering, including culturally specific experiences of degradation and harm, realizing that at times I may neither see nor understand another person's hurt, even when I have the best of intentions.⁵

1. Ann Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994), 238-45.

2. Dwight Boyd, "Criticizing with Care: Response to Diller," in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, 246-49.

3. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 101-2.

4. Maryann Ayim and Barbara Houston, "A Conceptual Analysis of Sexism and Sexist Education," in *The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy, and Politics*, A. Diller, B. Houston, K. P. Morgan, and M. Ayim (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), chap. one.

5. I wish to thank Barbara Applebaum and Dwight Boyd for their thoughtful, perceptive responses to my work on educational criticism and nurturance. I appreciate their generous careful readings of my text and their open efforts not only to continue the conversation but also to extend the work itself. In addition to these published responses, a number of people have given me helpful feedback and told me of their own innovative extensions of my theoretical framework. In particular, I am especially grateful to Susan Laird for her enthusiastic encouragement and for her creative implementations; she not only has her students read and discuss my ideas, she also has the students apply these ideas by doing such things as exchanging "nurturant challenges" in connection with each other's work. In addition, I want to thank the other members of PHAEDRA, Jane Roland Martin, Jennifer Radden, Beatrice Nelson, Janet Farrell Smith, Susan Franzosa, and Barbara Houston, as well as Maryann Ayim, John Diller, and Kathryn Pauly Morgan for their helpful comments during various stages in my thinking and writing about these issues.