

## How to be Critical when Reflecting on Your Teaching

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The idea of critical reflection is a development of Habermas’s (1974) *critical social science*.

It is based on the assumption that self-reflection will be almost inevitably distorted by the social context and personal history of the reflector.

“...critical reflection entails a challenge to the hidden assumptions of both the reflector and those of the surrounding social context. Critical reflection goes beyond mere reflection, which could be simply a review of actions in the light of accepted precepts, in that it requires the reflector to “deconstruct long-held habits of behaviour by looking beyond the behaviour itself to their own self-image and examining why they do what they do”. (Silverman & Casazza 2000: 239).

In other words, when engaging in critical reflection you should *make explicit* and *challenge* (as in review) your own basic assumptions and those of the community (society) in which you work.

According to Brookfield (1988), four activities are central to critical reflection:

1. **Assumption analysis** – This is the first step in the critical reflection process. It involves thinking in such a manner that you challenge your own beliefs, values, cultural practices and social structures. The purpose of this is not, necessarily, to overthrow these beliefs and values but, rather, to assess their impact on our daily proceedings and thus be able to see more clearly causal relationships. Assumptions are our way of seeing reality and but if we are unaware of them they can trap us into false reasoning.
2. **Contextual awareness** – Realizing that our assumptions are socially and personally created in a specific historical and cultural context.
3. **Imaginative speculation** – Imagining alternative ways of thinking about phenomena in order to find better ways of doing things. This is really what is meant by the oft-use but little understood phrase “thinking outside the box”.
4. **Reflective skepticism** - Questioning of universal truth claims or unexamined patterns of behaviour and interaction through the prior three activities (assumption analysis, contextual awareness, and imaginative speculation). It is the ability to think about a subject so that taken-for-granted assumptions are suspended or temporarily rejected in order to establish the truth of an analysis or the viability of a proposition.

In a later paper, Brookfield (1995) suggests that there are, at least, three different types of assumption.

***Paradigmatic assumptions*** are the hardest of all assumptions to uncover. They are the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories. Usually we don't even recognize them as assumptions, even after they've been pointed out to us. Instead we insist that they're objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts as we know them to be true. Some paradigmatic assumptions I have held at different stages of my life as a teacher are that adults are self-directed learners, that critical thinking is an intellectual function characteristic of adult life, that good adult educational processes are inherently democratic, and that education always has a political dimension. Paradigmatic assumptions are examined critically only after a great deal of resistance to doing this, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged and changed, the consequences for our lives are explosive.

***Prescriptive assumptions*** are assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation. They are the assumptions that are surfaced as we examine how we think teachers should behave, what good educational processes should look like, and what obligations students and teachers owe to each other. Inevitably they are grounded in, and extensions of, our paradigmatic assumptions. For example, if you believe that adults are self-directed learners then you assume that the best teaching is that which encourages students to take control over designing, conducting and evaluating their own learning.

***Causal assumptions*** are assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. They are usually stated in predictive terms. An example of a causal assumption would be that if we use learning contracts this will increase students' self-directedness. Another would be the assumption that if we make mistakes in front of students this creates a trustful environment for learning in which students feel free to make errors with no fear of censure or embarrassment. Of all the assumptions we hold, causal ones are the easiest to uncover. Most of the reflective exercises described in this book will, if they work well, clarify teachers' causal assumptions. But discovering and investigating these is only the start of the reflective process. We must then try to find a way to work back to the more deeply embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions we hold.”

Scholarship of TeachingContinue Summative Assignment

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