



Critical Inquiry for the Social Good: Methodological Work as a Means for Truth-Telling in Education

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Abstract

This article questions the ubiquity of the term “critical” in methodological scholarship, calling for a renewed association of the term with projects concerned with social justice, truth-telling, and overt articulations of the social good. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s work with parrhesia (or truth-telling) and Aristotle’s articulation of phronesis (or practical knowledge), the authors situate critical inquiry as a political project of interrupting the present for a more socially-just future.

Keywords: *Truth, Parrhesia, Critical, Phronesis, Methodology*

This special issue of *Critical Questions in Education* is dedicated to new understandings of critical methodologies in education. The repetition of the descriptive term *critical* is intentional in this case as the critical question we sought to engage asks what it means to conduct critical inquiry within the realm of education. That is, how might our enacted methodologies enable or activate elements of productive change that we imagine as necessary for the future of education specifically and radical democracy more generally? More than the relation of empirical results to various policy reforms (as is often the case in discussions of educational research) we sought engaged perspectives that interrogate larger order questions regarding assumptions of knowing and being (epistemic and ontic in order) that are necessarily implicated in the very act of inquiry. Further, we asked authors to link such assumptions with considerations for social justice; radical claims that we might be other than we currently are and that education might be a viable vehicle for social change.

And yet, we wanted to begin somewhat self-consciously. Indeed, the initial idea for this issue began with our shared concern regarding the overuse and fashionable ambiguity of the term, *critical*. As has been noted in the past, the term *critical* is ubiquitous in contemporary academic scholarship, particularly in relation to philosophical and methodological work.¹ Far from noting a specific theoretical approach and/or time period (such as *critical theory*, associated with the Frankfurt School, for example), there now exist a host of approaches, conceptualizations, and techniques that share the *critical* descriptor, often without any overt connection to one another (critical geography, critical race studies, critical phenomenology, critical quantitative research, critical inquiry, are but a few of these examples).

1. Aaron Kuntz, *The Responsible Methodologist: Inquiry, Truth-Telling, and Social Justice* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015).

At the same time, we are not yet ready to relinquish the term in our own work or in the work of those whose scholarship we have come to admire; *critical* is a term worth sustaining. As such, we thought it important to survey the contemporary field and developed a call for articles that provokes the term *critical* specifically in relation to methodological work. What might a *critical methodology* look like given contemporary socio-political and theoretical contexts? How might it be enacted? What does it require of the *critical methodologist*? How might these engagements be different (or similar) within the various traditions of critical inquiry?

In counter-distinction to the ever-presence of *critical* distinctions, we remained similarly concerned with an apparent hesitancy to invoke terms such as *truth* and the *good* in contemporary scholarship, particularly within the field of education. Indeed, in conversations and written texts alike, scholars seem to go to extraordinary linguistic lengths to avoid claiming or otherwise uttering such terms for fear of over-essentializing or determining subjects, actions, claims (and more). Given the intersection of our contemporary moment (of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, hyper-globalization, etc) with trends in theorizations (of the posts—postmodernism, posthumanism, post-materialism, etc) we saw both a need for complex interrogations of our world *and* an overt political stance for social justice. Bringing the two together, we provocatively assert that one cannot reasonably claim criticality without an explicit orientation towards truth. In short, ours is a time for stark assertions of right and wrong—justice and injustice—as well as clear claims regarding the assumptions that link our inquiry practices with progressive social change. How is it possible, for example, to conduct *critical* inquiry in education without an overt political stance that maintains some claim regarding truth and the social good? Though this remains important in a host of disciplines and fields of study, it is particularly important in the area of education. As historically, socially, and politically constructed spaces, critical analysis of schools requires more than simplistic suggestions that these institutions are “broken.” If productive critique is to occur within the field of education it must necessarily invoke a way of being other than we currently are; a provocative break with what *was* in the interest of calling forth new educational practices and engagements with the world. As such, we suggest that critical inquirers must intervene by invoking a particular orientation to truth and notions of the good; orientations which postulate a meaningful future while uprooting the problematics of the past and present.

Importantly, we situate inquiry generally—and methodological work more specifically—within two overarching philosophical concerns of *truth-telling* and *practical wisdom*. Specifically, we assert that critical work necessarily situates inquiry within an assumed responsibility for the public good: one thus engages in inquiry practices in order to promote a more socially-just society. This alignment of inquiry with social-justice work productively challenges the general use of *critical*, a term all-too-easily (and simplistically) invoked in contemporary educational discourse. To be *critical* one must work towards truth-claims that disrupt the normative flow of common-sense; critical work cannot replicate what is already known (this, of course is the central distinction between *difference* and *repetition* that forms the basis of Deleuze’s [1995] text of the same name; out of difference, thinking is possible). As such, *critical inquiry* is necessarily radical, critiquing the existing status quo even as it envisions possible alternatives to the contemporary moment. This, we propose, provocatively challenges methodological work within the contemporary academy: how might inquiry be differently (and, we might say, more progressively/usefully/productively) “critical” if we begin from a notion of truth/the good (as opposed to moving away from or ignoring such notions)? This special issue is thus driven by our collective interest in how scholars might re-envision “critical work” when they have to take a stand on truth/the good.

Given our above assertions of what it means to be *critical*, much work in educational scholarship that invokes the term might be interpreted as critical in name only. “Critical” methodologies

disappointingly remain at the level of the procedural, offering only inquiry techniques as the means through which to engage in critical work. Yet, such technical formations can never intervene in the incessant production of the status quo; situated at the level of procedure they remain governed by the very rationalities that implicate our contemporary moment. Additionally, the postmodern moment, while offering a useful deconstruction of grand narratives, has perhaps left us in a state of scholarly paralysis when it comes to possibilities of repair or even renewal. Though the proliferation of “critical” scholarship within various traditions (*critical race, critical Latina/o, critical feminist, critical disability studies, etc.*) has worked to challenge existing hegemonic norms within the educational landscape, this scholarship often remains hesitant to move toward its own notions of truth or the good. But, is it enough to challenge the status quo only to find ourselves groundless? Can we move toward a critical praxis which takes on positive notions of truth and the good while still holding to contextual understandings of these same notions? What answers do the various critical traditions provide about socially-just education and how might these answers intersect or depart from one another? In response, we asked educational scholars to consider a more engaged sense of critical work, one that orients towards the production of truth-claims surrounding the common good. Critical methodologies would, in turn, establish orientations towards meaning-making that are profoundly political, challenging not simply normative claims, but the very means by which such claims are made. In this way, critical work intervenes simultaneously on epistemological and methodological levels.

This issue begins with a philosophical grounding regarding critical work as an important point of departure. To begin the discussion, we offer two overlapping orientations towards criticality and methodology: 1) Foucault’s sense of *parrhesia* (or truth-telling) and 2) Aristotelian notions of *phronesis* (or practical wisdom).² Through overlapping *parrhesia* with *phronesis* we seek a useful means of intersecting disruptive truth-telling with a deliberative orientation towards some good; inquiry thus becomes a political project of interrupting the present for a more socially-just future.

For Foucault, truth-telling involves recognizing and speaking a truth that is not otherwise made visible by normative ways of knowing or coming to know. Thus, in order to engage in *parrhesia*, one must break from the past in order to imagine a yet-to-be-realized future. In order to do so, one must engage in truth-telling through three intersecting processes: 1) citizenship; 2) responsibility; 3) risk.³ To begin, the truth-teller must position him/herself as a *citizen*—that is, as a recognized participant within some community. In regards to critical inquiry within the academy, this notion of citizenship asks faculty scholars to speak from their privileged position within higher education. That is, our role as faculty citizens grants us the opportunity to engage in truth-telling back to the very institution that grants us visibility. Next, the truth-teller has a *responsibility* to speak those truths that disrupt the otherwise smooth power formations that produce institutions and inform our daily practices of living. *Parrhesia* offers no space for equivocation or the convenience of silence—it is the responsibility of the truth-teller to disrupt through making such truths visible. Lastly, the truth-teller necessarily *risks* his/her relation to the very institutions that grant him/her citizenship. Thus it is that those of us who are in the field of education must necessarily recognize that our very critique might irrevocably disrupt our own positions (as methodologists,

2. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège De France 1983-1984*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

3. Foucault, *Courage of the Truth*. What follows is a quick gloss of how *parrhesia* develops from specific claims for citizenship, responsibility, and risk. For a more thorough treatment of *parrhesia*, particularly as it relates to educational inquiry, see Kuntz, *The Responsible Methodologist*.

as professors, etc.). Indeed, how can one reimagine a new vision for education and social justice and, at the same time, maintain the status quo of institutional assignment and practice? Thus it is that *parrhesia* requires quite a bit from the truth-teller even as it remains fertile ground for the possibilities for being (and becoming) otherwise.

Similarly, *phronesis* is grounded in a deliberative judgment of the present in order to know how to act in an unforeseen future. Aristotle defines *phronesis* as a rational state of truth “concerning what is good and bad for a human being.”⁴ Both practical and value rationality are central to *phronesis* as it is concerned with the complexity of practical problems and the ethical deliberation needed to successfully navigate them. Importantly, *phronesis* is distinguished from truths that are grounded in epistemic or technical formulations. It concerns things which can be otherwise, or which can be deliberated about nobly in the setting of ethical discourse. Thus, *phronesis* serves as an important framework for inquiry that is committed to truth and truth-telling while recognizing the context-dependent nature of this practice in the realm of human affairs. *Phronesis* further situates discussions of *what could be* within deliberations of *what should be*.

As such, both *parrhesiastic* and *phronetic* orientations towards knowing and doing involve: an engaged analysis of the past; a recognition of how historical ways of knowing and being implicate the present; a determination to point a way forward towards a more socially-just future; a contextually grounded sense of value rationality and an explicit determination of ethical practice. Consequently, *parrhesia* and *phronesis* offer select challenges to “critical” methodological work. No longer can someone claim the critical mantle solely by critiquing what is (this would be equivalent to saying the educational system is broken, throwing one’s hands up, and moving along). Instead, critical work involves a great degree of risk—requiring as it does a commitment to work for some unknown future in the name of social justice or the social good.

In the end, our deliberate call for papers resulted in such an outpouring of thoughtful, engaged scholarship that we imposed upon the journal editors to publish two issues—this current issue and another to follow in spring of 2017. The articles that make up these issues share a dedication to utilize inquiry as a means to challenge and change education. Though some are conceptual and others are empirical in order, all of the articles refuse to acquiesce to the seduction of scholarly disinterest—they, quite simply, seek social justice ends.

To this end, Austin Pickup begins this special issue by re-orienting the notion of critical work with conceptions of *praxis*. Rather than situating *praxis* within contemporary debates found in critical pedagogy, Pickup locates *praxis* within Aristotelian Ethics, linking the term with ethical debates surrounding concerns for practical wisdom (or, *phronesis*). Framing *phronesis-praxis* within ethical deliberations grants Pickup an important link to *parrhesiastic* practices of truth-telling. Thus it is that Pickup concludes that *critical* work necessarily entails virtuous acts, shifting concerns for critical research away from technical distinctions and to a sustained ethical deliberation with questions and assertions regarding truth. Through his careful work with Ancient Greek philosophy, Pickup sets the tone for the rest of the issue.

The next article, by Kakali Bhattacharya, also locates the notion of *praxis* as key to critical inquiry, though does so from a post-oppositional theoretical stance. In contrast to a tradition of oppositional practice in academic scholarship, Bhattacharya advocates for critical work that is productive; “enactments of possibilities” that simultaneously address individualized suffering and structural oppression in education. Key to Bhattacharya’s article is the means by which post-oppositional approaches to inquiry align with an onto-epistemological framework that refuses the violence of separating knowing from doing. Bhattacharya’s is a call for a radical restructuring of

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 107.

critical scholarship, one that situates *critical* as endlessly productive and making possible previously unimagined possibilities for social justice.

Crystal Laura next offers love as a framework for social inquiry that disrupts simplistic understandings of research as a distant process of technical procedure. She turns our attention to the human side of inquiry, noting that research involves problems that “bear on the everyday circumstances of real people.” Through reflections on her own research experiences on the school-to-prison pipeline and engagements with her family, Laura suggests that intimate inquiry can reposition critically committed researchers toward personally active and politically engaged projects that challenge the contemporary push to conform to traditional academic protocol. As such, she presents us with an activist stance devoted to ethical discourse and truth-telling.

Through a specific engagement with ethnography, Sophia Rodriguez articulates a methodology of death as an extension of Deleuzoguattarian claims on philosophy-as-method and the phenomenon of the event. Through her careful considerations of youth activism in Chicago, Rodriguez offers new ways of thinking with the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari; ways that promote possibility and new birth as extensions of critical inquiry. Rodriguez’s article offers the reader important interrogations of normative practices of truth-telling *and* critical efforts at intervention, situated within a philosophically-deep understanding of research-as-inquiry.

Further linking methodological considerations to truth-telling, Trevor Warburton suggests that the oft-discussed notion of researcher reflexivity in qualitative research is often absent from studies utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). He argues that CDA must better incorporate reflexive self-analysis in order to disrupt dominant discourses. Importantly, Warburton writes that researcher reflexivity is an essential form of truth-telling as the lack of self-analysis unintentionally reinforces dominant discourses. He illustrates this through sample analyses of working with social justice educators, noting that self-reflexive CDA allowed for the understanding of his own reinscription of White-centered conceptions of progressive teaching in his original analysis. Warburton’s discussion is important as it furthers the understanding that critical truth-telling is an engaged dialogue with oneself and others, rather than a disengaged, technical process.

Further examining the notion of engagement in relation to critical inquiry, Brian Lozenski draws from an extended ethnographic study to situate jazz as a productive epistemological metaphor for critical participatory research. Through *Jazz*, Lozenski demonstrates the productive possibilities for *dissonance*, a key term in the relation between meaning-making and truth-telling. The concept of dissonance points to the necessity for discomfort in critical qualitative inquiry, drawing towards the possibilities inherent in epistemological crisis. Such disruptions, Lozenski demonstrates, have profound implications for both the practice of inquiry and teaching practices within the classroom itself.

Ezekiel Kimball similarly pulls from empirical work to better understand unique approaches to truth claims in educational inquiry. Specifically operating from a post-pragmatist epistemological lens, Kimball reveals the limitations of traditional approaches to formal theory even as he demonstrates the usefulness of theory-engaged methodology in educational research. In order to ground his analysis, Kimball points to the mechanisms by which inquiry and theory operate within the student affairs profession, a field historically dominated by prescriptions for best practices for knowing and doing. Through his study of student affairs practitioners, Kimball demonstrates how theory is utilized within daily practices, thereby demonstrating inroads for critical approaches to understanding that are not tethered to the limitations of prescription or replications of the status quo.

Next, Emily Nusbaum and Kathleen Sitter turn our attention to duoethnography. In this article, the authors explore duoethnography as both method and object of analysis. They perform

duoethnography to explore and more deeply understand their own recent encounters with it and its potential as a critical qualitative methodology in the context of normativity and ableism. Again connecting us to the theme of this issue, exploring diverse conceptions of truth-telling within critical inquiry, Nusbaum and Sitter intentionally unpack their own beliefs through the duoethnographic account, emphasizing the act of researchers engaging in dialogic encounter. This again underscores the conception of critical inquiry as an interventionist stance that incorporates oneself within the research endeavor.

Lastly, Joy Howard, Kindel Nash, Sophia Rodriguez, and Candace Thompson provide a provocative look into the methodological entanglement of critical ethnography. Through diffractive analysis and a diversity of theoretical frameworks, the authors discuss personal episodes where their researcher roles were challenged, repositioned, or reframed in conducting justice work. Specifically, they highlight the notion of *missing stories*, occasions where the traditional sense of academic scholarship is troubled by the intimacy of participant stories or the inappropriateness of working toward a singular truth. Each author recounts instances where the traditional move to represent truth through scholarship was challenged or even halted due to these entangled processes of critical engagement. This article foregrounds the notion of *risk* within not speaking, or at least not speaking within the limits of traditional academic scholarship, and thus adds a fresh contribution to understandings of methodological risk in critical inquiry.

Together, these articles offer specific and strategic interventions into the normative status quo in the name of social justice. The authors throughout this special issue refuse the all-to-easy simplification of methodology as a technocratic enterprise and, instead, situate inquiry as an engaged process of activating for a more socially just world. It is our hope that the articles in this issue challenge readers to more intentionally align their goals for an unknown future with overt claims regarding truth, truth-telling, and the ethics of working for the social good.

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