

Critical Thinking and Educational Ideal

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Abstract: Critical thinking, as an educational trend, has been much discussed and proposed nowadays. In this paper, an analysis is made on the gap between our present educational practice and educational ideal from three different aspects, that is, the content, the manner and the one-sidedness of our teaching. It's observed that there is still a long way to go in order to realize our educational ideal and critical thinking, and critical pedagogy should be widely promoted and applied so as to foster well-educated people in its true sense. A conclusion is finally reached that education is the core no matter what theories and concepts are proposed and adopted.

Key words: critical thinking; educational ideal; gap

1. Introduction

As is well known, education plays an important role in the development of society. As far as an individual is concerned, education prepares him or her for the adulthood and the society. As far as a country is concerned, education brings her wealth and prosperity. The more developed and civilized one country is, the more well-educated people there are, vice versa. As for the criteria of the well-educated people, different opinions are held by different groups. But as a whole, people tend to be very critical and expect much from the well-educated individuals. For example, they should possess not only intelligent mind, but also lofty soul and so on. It's obvious that not all the products of high education meet the criteria and there still exists some distance between our educational practice and educational ideal. Problems still abound despite our educational endeavor. In the present paper, this phenomenon will be briefly addressed from the following three aspects:

2. The Content of Our Teaching

The content of teaching is expected to vary with the development of society. Juan-Miguel argues that "knowledge construction is always based on the needs and interests of humans; moreover, these interests and needs are shaped by particular social and historical conditions and circumstances."^[1] However, though our society is developing in a surprising speed, our teaching content, in some degree, is not. It's a common phenomenon that theories are separated from practice and some materials in many textbooks are out of date. John-Dewey also argues that "to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world."^[2] If a graduate leaves school only to find that the knowledge he has mastered can't satisfy the need of the society or what he has learned can't be fully applied in his work, is he still confident that he is a well-educated person?

3. The Manner of Our Teaching

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As transmitters of knowledge, the role of teachers has never been neglected. On the contrary, teachers have been given absolute authority and students are not expected to challenge this kind of authority. According to John Dewey, “the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience.”^[2] As a result, students are not encouraged to form their opinions and thoughts. They are used to looking for keys to questions from their teachers and textbooks. We teachers, as both victims and practitioners of this kind of long-term educational practice, often find that it’s very difficult to hear original and fresh ideas from our students and ourselves as well. Having realized the seriousness of this problem, many educators who assert critical thinking suggest teaching in the critical manner. As Harvey puts it, “a teacher who utilizes the critical manner seeks to encourage in his or her students the skills, habits and dispositions necessary for the development of critical spirit. This means, first, that the teacher always recognizes the right of the student to question and demand reasons; and consequently recognizes an obligation to provide reasons whenever demanded.” Our education and society will develop with a much faster speed when this critical manner of teaching is accepted and applied by we teachers and students as well.

4. The One-sidedness of Our Education

In our society, it’s a common practice that the development of intelligence is overemphasized while moral, physical, and aesthetic education and so on are widely neglected. In such an educational system, high education produces numerous individuals who deteriorate morally and physically despite their high intelligence quotient. As a result, competition becomes much fiercer while co-operation becomes less and less; sense of trust and respect is lacked everywhere; indifference among people increases while caring for others diminishes; people get more and more blind to social unjustness, etc. therefore, it’s difficult for us to conclude that our education has achieved great success with the speedy accumulation of wealth and wide deterioration of morality at the same time. Fortunately, attention has been paid to this phenomenon and proposals are offered too. Juan-Miguel emphasizes, in his “Critical Pedagogy Making Critical Thinking Really Critical”, the role of critical pedagogy. “Critical pedagogy is a didactic form whose primary purpose is to make the learners (both the teacher and the student alike) more fully human and whose ultimate purpose is to create a more just society.”^[1] Barbara also argues that reasoning abilities and rationality are not enough in the development of the students and defends the importance of caring. “By caring, I mean being receptive to what another has to say, and open to possibly hearing the other’s voice more completely and fairly. One needs to learn as much as one can about her own personal voice and what it contributes to the way one views the world and other people, and one needs to develop and enhance one’s ability to care for others.”^[3]

5. Conclusions

In short, it’s natural that there still exists a long distance between our educational practice and educational ideal, as a result of the defects mentioned above and some other unfavorable factors. Fortunately, this gap has been noticed and efforts have been made to shorten the distance between teaching practice and ideal. Critical thinking, the term’s appearance and wide application in our educational theory is just a representation of our educational endeavor. Critical thinking, as is noted, is still a concept in development. “The term ‘critical thinking’ does not have a simple meaning. Its definition can be distorted and interpreted in many different ways depending

on how we construct knowledge.”^[1] It should not be denied that critical thinking has started to play an important role in the present teaching practice. And that’s the reason why some educators suggest that it should be taken as social practice and others, educational ideal. Nevertheless, however important this concept is, whatever future this concept owns, what really matters is its nature—education. Just as John Dewey puts it, “what we want and need is education pure and simple, and we shall make surer and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan.”^[2]

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