



Critical Inquiry, Truth-telling, and the Good: Problematization and Reconstruction for a Socially Just Education

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Abstract

This article extends the discussion of critical methodologies in education, arguing that critical work must exhibit both an explicit orientation toward truth and social justice and an engagement with how theoretical considerations of the good connect to material practices. More specifically, we center Colin Koopman's notion of genealogical pragmatism to suggest that critical work must focus on both problematization and reconstruction of the often dire circumstances that characterize our contemporary moment in education. We use this philosophical discussion as an introduction to the articles comprising this special issue on critical inquiry.

Keywords: *truth, parrhesia, critical, phronesis, genealogy, pragmatism*

Introduction

The continued interrogation and illustration of critical methodologies within educational contexts constitutes the focus of the second part of this special double issue of *Critical Questions in Education*. In the introduction to the first issue, we argued that the term *critical* has become fashionably overused within much academic scholarship, thus losing its overt and explicit connection to truth, social justice, and questions of the good. Our suggestion was that, in order to truly engage in critical methodological work, one cannot occupy the position of disinterested technical expert, but must intervene in the normative framings of the social and political with explicit orientations toward truth-telling and the good. Connecting this argument to our own areas of academic interest, we situated criticality within the frameworks of Foucauldian *parrhesia*, or truth-telling, and Aristotelian *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.¹

We view these distinct frameworks as complementary and foundational to critical work as they possess important overlapping features. First, both contain explicit orientations toward truth and modes of ethical deliberation. Foucault's *parrhesiastes* takes risks to speak the truth in the continual work of care of the self and care for others. At the same time, Aristotle's *phronimos* possesses the intellectual virtue to deliberate about truth relative to praxis, or "what is good and bad for a human being."² Second, each exhibits a crucial convergence of theory and practice

1. Aaron Kuntz and Austin Pickup, "Critical Inquiry for the Social Good: Methodological Work as a Means for Truth-telling in Education," *Critical Questions in Education* 7, no. 1 (2016): 171-177.

2. See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2001) and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 107.

within the context of everyday living. Both *parrhesiastes* and *phronimos* must diagnose problems that exist within the practical realities of life along theoretical angles of ethical discourse. Importantly, however, the truth-teller and practically wise person do not simply stop at the conceptual level of analysis but *enact* understandings of truth and the good in one's own life; in short, the truths explicated critically relate to *praxis*, the practical world of action in view of some good end, and are materially ensconced in the lived practices of the everyday.

It is this second feature of criticality that we will use as a means of introduction to part II of this special issue. The meaningful connection between theory and practice is a perennial problem within philosophical and methodological work.³ Contributing to this problem is the simplistic understanding taken from many “post” schools of philosophy that truth and meaning are situated determinedly within historical, social, cultural, etc. formations and thus relatively constructed. As such, in the first issue, we suggested that our postmodern moment presents a certain amount of hesitancy toward invoking truth claims, with scholars going to great lengths to avoid such language for fear of over-essentializing their focus of inquiry.⁴ If the truth of the social world leans away from universalism and tends toward historical contingency, one might question whether or not it is appropriate to explicitly merge theoretical inquiry with practical life. Working from this conundrum, one might investigate the problems facing schools in our contemporary context purely from a theoretical level and avoid making claims about what we are to do in the specific instance of schooling itself. That is, this reductionist orientation unnecessarily distances theoretical claims—made on epistemological and ontological levels—from the localized contexts in which education occurs.

While certainly one should always be reflexive and accountable to truths posited, avoiding truth and practical notions of the good (for fear of essentializing one's position, for example, or infringing on the cultural claims of another) does not align with the features of critical methodology we find pivotal to the project of social justice. Critical work necessarily intervenes in the status quo *and* links to *praxis* by offering alternative modes of action from those we critique as problematic. Critical work involves taking a stand for change based on a vision for social justice, scary and challenging though that might be. Thus, we might ask how the historically contingent nature of truth in social contexts can be merged with the more forward-looking project of naming what we *should* do. This position deviates from a relativistic positioning that immobilizes the critic from engaging in theoretically informed social justice action. Instead, a relational ethic binds the critic to the very phenomena in which s/he seeks to intervene.⁵

Such a merger requires an expansive and, perhaps, more paradigmatically inclusive orientation toward criticality than is often seen in academic scholarship. This, at least, is the view taken by Colin Koopman in much of his work that seeks to productively connect continental philosophy with the traditions of pragmatism and critical theory. Koopman suggests that philosophical lines in the sand are unnecessary as they prevent scholars and practitioners from meaningful dialogue and the ability to put to productive use modes of inquiry that they would typically dismiss. The issue for Koopman is methodologically, rather than metaphysically, driven as he begins from the standpoint of the problematical situations in which we exist. To engage in critical

3. And, we might add, this forced binary is misplaced. Theorizing *is* a practice. Conversely, all practices develop through some theoretical claim. It seems what people most often mean by the forced bifurcation of theory from practice is the question of whether some theory is *practical*. This is, of course, an entirely different question.

4. Kuntz and Pickup, 172.

5. For a more explicit discussion of relativistic and relational logic in critical methodologies, see Aaron Kuntz, *The Responsible Methodologist: Inquiry, Truth-Telling, and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2015).

work requires both a deep understanding of the problem at hand and the potentialities for reconstruction of the problem, be they implicit or explicit. This, Koopman notes, is where traditional philosophical divisions (between analytic, continental, and pragmatist philosophy, for example) remain unproductive, particularly when set against the often-overwhelming array of social issues that collide in our present moment. He writes:

All of these divisions are obstacles to productive philosophical work on the critical problems we face in the present, as a culture and society, as a discipline and profession, and as ethical matters we all feel the force of in intensely personal ways.⁶

Rather than focusing on the thematic connections and/or disconnections between disparate philosophical traditions, Koopman attempts to pull methodological tools from these traditions (and individual theorists within them) to assist in the development of a more general critical project; one that aims at both understanding problems and rectifying them. Thus, he sees productive linkages between figures such as Foucault, Deleuze, James, Dewey, Habermas and others who have traditionally been viewed as philosophically distant or even antagonistic. In particular, Koopman offers *genealogical pragmatism* as a historically-informed orientation to critical inquiry that makes productive use of both continental and pragmatist philosophies.⁷ A brief analysis of genealogical pragmatism follows, which is meant to illustrate the (re)convergence of theory and practice that, we believe, is crucial for critical methodological work and is exemplified in the articles comprising these special issues.

Genealogical Pragmatism

Koopman describes genealogical pragmatism as an extended network of criticality that brings together distinct philosophical components as part of a methodological toolkit for engaging contemporary problems. He describes genealogy, emanating from the continental tradition, as “a historical backward-facing practice of philosophical critique that looks to articulate, so as to intensify, the problematizations which condition our possibilities for doing, thinking, and being in the present.” In contrast, Koopman describes pragmatism as “a forward-facing practice of philosophical critique that looks toward the responsive reconstruction of problematic situations in which we sometimes find ourselves.”⁸ Despite the different directions faced by each tradition, Koopman suggests that, under the umbrella of critique, these lines of inquiry call for each other as reinforcing frameworks. He argues that the productive use of genealogy and pragmatism together offers a more potent orientation to critical work that may cover the weaknesses of each approach individually. In other words, while genealogy may be particularly effective at diagnosing and contributing to our understanding of problems, it is less effective at the future-oriented task of rectifying problems central to pragmatic inquiry, and vice versa.

Turning to Foucault, Koopman contends that the central feature of his genealogical project (importantly distinguished from the more subversive work of Nietzsche) is the concept of

6. Colin Koopman, “Foucault and Pragmatism: Introductory Notes on Metaphilosophical Methodology,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 11 (2011): 4.

7. Colin Koopman, “Genealogical Pragmatism: How History Matters for Foucault and Dewey,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, no. 5 (2011): 531-559.

8. Koopman, “Foucault and Pragmatism,” 6.

problematization.⁹ The point of problematization for Foucault is to use historical analysis to uproot contemporary objects from their stable perch of inevitability and to offer them as contingently made. Foucault says that problematization is a particular “work of thought” that involves “the development of a given into a question”.¹⁰ Thus, Foucault *problematized* things such as discipline, power, and sexuality through his genealogical projects. This work opens up the possibility for new responses to contemporary problems concerning these topics once they become displaced by historical inquiry that illustrates their contingent construction over time and space. It is such a project of denaturalizing contemporary phenomena through historical contextualization that provides critical inquirers with both the knowledge and tools to re-make the present.

On the other hand, Koopman centers *reconstruction* as the central feature of pragmatic inquiry, specifically looking to Dewey as an illustrative figure for this work. He writes that, for Dewey, reconstruction is the “purposive transforming of a situation for the sake of its improvement.”¹¹ This intentional task of offering specific solutions to problems contrasts with the genealogical project of laying those problems in front of us and suggesting the possibility for thinking otherwise. Though perhaps contrasting in orientation, genealogical and pragmatic work complement one another as the problem *setting* of problematization serves as a catalyst for the problem *solving* of reconstruction.¹²

What is important to take from this analysis is that genealogy and pragmatism, though accomplishing different and opposite tasks, are not in contradiction, but two sides of the same methodological coin of critical inquiry. This is not necessarily to say that all critical research must engage something specifically called genealogy or pragmatism, but rather that Koopman’s description of genealogical pragmatism as an ensemble of critical inquiry illustrates the interventionist character and theory/practice convergence that we argue is fundamental to this work. At a deeper level, critical methodologists should entangle in the messy work of problematization, or the theoretical inquiries necessary to help sufficiently understand the problems set before us. When such problematizations provide the tools for thinking otherwise, critical methodologists must engage in the practical work of reconstruction, or offering interventions in the social world to transform it for ends of truth, justice, and the good. Thus, critical methodology becomes neither simply theoretical (as is often the criticism of practitioners) nor naively practical (which we might say characterizes much educational reform and practice), but rather merges theoretical problematization with practical reconstruction in the larger project of transforming the world for the better.

Further, this presentation of critical methodological work recognizes the imaginative capacity required by such endeavors. One must problematize the normalizing logic that interprets the past in determined ways and search for another, yet to be recognized, sequencing of effects. At the same time, one must envision a possible future not wholly determined by the trappings of the normalized present. This is to work within the incomplete, yet to do so with a determination of what might yet be; dwelling in ambiguity the critical methodologist nonetheless points to the possible.

9. Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013): 44-48.

10. Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 388-389.

11. Koopman, “Genealogical Pragmatism,” 544.

12. *Ibid*, 543.

If we turn these considerations to education, we would simply be honest to say that the current educational landscape is rife with problems. From the continual privatization, commodification, and economization of schools, to the mechanical reduction of teaching and learning, to the reproduction of social inequalities, educators need an appropriate critical framework to productively problematize and reconstruct these issues. It is important to note that critical work in this sense resolutely commits the inquirer to truth-telling, justice, and the good. In other words, the notion that a researcher approaches problems in a disinterested fashion, relying solely on the perceived veracity of research technique, is not the kind of critical inquiry we espouse; indeed, such distanced research practice is not critical at all, but rather reinvokes the very normalizing logic of distance that we find problematic. Further, research that invokes the mantle of criticality simply by saying something is wrong or bad (as though statements of value were all that were necessary to produce critical research), without something akin to problematization is similarly absent the critical necessity of requiring one to think otherwise or develop a reconstruction that offers meaningful alternatives. Indeed, we suggest that critical educational scholarship needs an intentional orientation toward truth, justice, and the good if it is to take seriously the myriad problems faced in education and the possibility of transforming them.

What has been explained here is an attempt at conceptualizing such a critical orientation and, simultaneously, providing a philosophical introduction to the articles comprising these special issues. It was our intention to devote the first issue to more theoretical considerations of the concept of critical methodology and the present issue to papers illustrating more empirical, or practically-oriented, representations of critical research. Having said that, there is an appropriate balance of theoretical and empirical articles in each issue that engage critical methodology across a diverse array of educational contexts. To our theme in this introduction, we hope that the collection of articles within the special issues of this journal productively problematize and offer implications for reconstruction of meaningful critical research in education.

Summary of Individual Articles

The first two articles set the theoretical tone for this second special issue. David Roof, Elena Polush, and Philip Boltz situate *parrhesia* (or, truth-telling) as a guiding approach to critical methodology, one that engages a sense of praxis through sustained action and dialogue. Importantly, *parrhesia* brings with it an ethical imperative to educational research, one that requires courage and risk from the inquirer. Through *parrhesia*, educational research is cultivated as a critical praxis, one missing from traditional forms of critical inquiry.

Ryan Gildersleeve, in turn, situates truth-telling within the predicament of ritual culture and critical inquiry. Grounding his cartographic work within higher education, Gildersleeve offers enactments of the Latino graduation ceremony as *parrhesia*-in-process. This important work results in the explication of the fundamental elements of both *critical inquiry* (as an intervention, as generative, and as materially constituted) and *global (inter)Action* (as producing the Anthropocene and simultaneously constituent of and constituting nature).

In a turn from a focus on *parrhesia* (rendered in the first two articles), critical multicultural educator Dilys Schoorman offers a “personal phronesis” of the scholarly life as curriculum. Taking on the historical question of, “what is a critical educator?” Schoorman enacts a critical perspective through an autoethnographic stance; one that leads to discussion of doctoral education as, itself, an undertaking of social justice. As such, Schoorman simultaneously makes a call

for and demonstrates critical research methodologies as a means to productively engage in our developing curriculum.

In a similar strategy of critical enactment, Garvey and Associates perform their critical work, though do so through engaging a critical dialogue on the challenge of social justice scholarship within academia. Their collective article thus takes the form of a dramaturgical engagement with critical theory with the intent of pushing (even exceeding) the boundaries of their normative field and research practice. Framed as a two-act play with no definitive resolution, the authors/actors invite readers to extend the dialogue they witness; they engage with(in) the very dialogue they initially encounter as the article.

Valerie Shirley engages critical methodology through the lens of Indigenous social justice pedagogy. In her article, she considers the role of this critical framework in a project of Indigenous nation-building with Diné youth. She foregrounds important features of criticality in the analysis of her study, such as risk-taking in teaching and deconstructing historical/social forces to develop student critical consciousness. As such, Shirley offers an important example of justice-oriented critical work in the context of teacher-student relationships.

Next, William Smith analyzes findings from a case study concerning racial narratives in the Obama era. Drawing upon critical race theory, visual research methods, and the work of Stuart Hall, Smith analyzes the responses of student participants within a photo elicitation study of a collection of images of Barack Obama. The responses of students created useful opportunities for critique of majority narratives within schools, such as silence, colorblindness, and post-racialism. Finally, Smith links the critical frameworks of race espoused by student responses to the images with Foucauldian *parrhesia*, as students took on personal and social risks to speak truthfully on race.

Another example of examinations of truth-telling in educational contexts, Brian Horn analyzes the experiences of pre-service teachers beginning student teaching during the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike. Horn uses particular cases of student teachers to examine their experiences of the strike, their general understandings of unions and school politics before and after the strike, and their feelings of preparation for activism and truth-telling. The study is connected to the larger educational context of weakened political activism, teacher unions, and organized labor nationwide. Horn concludes that engaging pre-service teacher experiences holds important implications for teacher educator programs in terms of preparing future teachers for the politics of schooling and developing as critical truth-tellers.

The next article, by Sally McMillan, Reese Todd, and Margaret Price, explores alternative spaces outside the academy to form a critical pedagogy that might reclaim critical work from often contradictory institutional objectives. Drawing upon a collaborative auto-ethnographic account, the authors offer *writing into* the wounds experienced by narrowly construed outcomes-based educational models developed within their institutions. Through this account, they suggest that collaborative work that is entangled with individual subjectivity, listening to both institutional scars and transformative possibilities, creates new venues for integrative critical pedagogy even while remaining in educational contexts contradictory to criticality. By centering *spaces*, both within and outside of institutions of higher education, the authors importantly center the material processes coinciding with critical engagement.

In the final article, Konstantine Kyriacopoulos and Marta Sánchez utilize a diverse array of critical frameworks to consider a critical methodology engaging community experiences of systemic injustice. These authors analyze potential sites of engagement for a critical methodological project in response to recent developments in North Carolina's educational landscape.

They offer this work as a collaborative community engagement that disrupts efforts to subvert the communal space of schools. Importantly, the authors center the critical work they envision as the moral action of a community aimed toward a just society.

Extending the focus of the first issue, we offer this collection of papers as a contribution to knowledge of the particular topics they examine and the more general conceptualization of what it means to engage in critical work on education. Within our contemporary moment, where the very notion of a public consciousness regarding education is consistently under threat, it seems pressing that scholars and practitioners committed to education for the social good take stock of their efforts to intervene in these normative discourses. We hope that this special issue can assist in some small way to this collective effort.

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