

A critique of

By Shilpa

Over the last several months, I have been thinking a lot about 'pedagogy': What is it? What is it not? In what settings does it appear? And in which settings do people learn and do without it?

As far as I can understand, we label 'pedagogy' as the practices and behaviours of what we call a 'teacher'. Our major reference point for the term 'teachers' is those who work within a system of education, i.e. schools, universities and colleges. In other words, when most children or young people are asked, "Who is your [favorite/best/worst] teacher?", they know to reply with the name of a person who leads the classes in their school. For most of us, this reference point dominates our understanding of 'teacher' while we are in school, and even when we are out of it (i.e., "Which teacher had the most impact on your life?")

But then, at some point, many of us also create a different reference point for 'teacher': those people in our lives, from whom (or because of whom) we feel we have understood some important value, or discovered a hidden potential, or been able to see the world — or ourselves — differently. Many things may distinguish these 'teachers' from those described above, but perhaps the most obvious difference is that they have not taken this label upon themselves. Rather, it is what we ascribe to them and their place in our lives — usually after the fact, while reminiscing or reevaluating an experience. At the same time, these 'teachers' may never have considered us their 'students'. Again, it is likely to be we who have taken on this identity, based on how we feel we have 'studied' and understood something (or ourselves) with, from or because of them.

I'll try to clarify this distinction with a personal example. Mrs Perkins was my favourite teacher in elementary school. She read wonderful stories to us; she rarely scolded anyone; she let us do creative projects and was generally warm and kind. I do not remember any of the content of Mrs Perkins' teaching, but I do remember her demeanour. If I concentrate deeply, I can think of two or three other teachers in my formal schooling, who I remember fondly — again, not because of the content of their classes, but rather because of the warm environment they created (at least for me).

In contrast, my grandmother, who has never been to school, is currently my most favourite teacher (although she would probably laugh if I called her this in public). But from her, not only am I learning Udaipur's local language, Mewari, but also discovering wonderful folk tales with powerful meanings, family customs, local festivals and new spiritual beliefs. Of late, she has been sharing with me her understanding of daily living practices (cooking, cleaning, growing food, wearing clothes, etc.) that are in balance with nature. In addition to all of this 'content', we are building a friendship of respect and love that will last our lifetimes.

Clearly, there are many differences between my grandmother as my 'teacher' and Mrs. Perkins as my teacher. Not the least of which is that, unlike Mrs. Perkins,

my grandmother cannot rank, evaluate, reward, punish, control or judge the extent of my learning and/or the extent to which I follow her 'teachings'. But more than that, I submit, is how each experience differs in its impact on my life, what it has meant for my own sense of place and work, and sense of self. Though I have nice memories of Mrs. Perkins as a person, I would not describe her as my 'teacher', for she made little difference in how I see the world, both from within and from without.

With all of this in mind, I turn to pedagogy and, specifically, critical pedagogy. If I understand correctly, this term refers to "the art of teaching in a way that critically questions the dominant social, political and economic system, its institutions, processes, and attitudes". It calls to attention certain injustices and exploitations, and hopes to lead students to raise questions, make demands, challenge wrong-doings, and ultimately change the system. This all sounds good, especially when we consider the severity of the crises we are facing today, which are clearly caused by a particular model of progress and development.

But the difficulty I have with critical pedagogy is that it ultimately traps one in the same mechanisms and processes that one is being critical of. For example, who controls the process and content of critical pedagogy? The teacher(s). S/he determines what one needs to be critical of, where it is 'right' (and where it is 'wrong') to be critical, to what extent one should be critical. With pedagogy, it is assumed that young people are lacking info-knowledge; they are ignorant; and this 'deficiency' is something only the teacher can remedy through his/her teachings. As happens with television and video games, young people serve as passive consumers of teachers' ideas, experiences and info-knowledge — although they may be radically critical of the dominant system. Students may ask questions, but the questions are framed within the teacher's reference points and are typically answered by the teacher. Or the teacher knows the end point of the conversation and works to lead the students to it.

In this way, critical pedagogy is quite reminiscent of the Socratic method. And if we seriously consider this similarity, we begin to realize how critical pedagogy works against the principles of critical thinking. As soon as one begins to see her/himself as Socrates — that is, as the keeper and disseminator of the 'truth' — s/he is participating in a kind of propaganda and thought-control, and is thereby replicating a major part of the dominant education-economic-political-social system.

Again, one might say, "Well, what's wrong with this? Clearly, the system is terrible. It is hurting human beings and all forms of life. It is leading to war, violence, hatred, greed, etc. Why shouldn't a teacher use critical pedagogy to teach his/her students to understand and challenge this? Their teachings may lead to real change in society."

I have several responses to this assertion. The first is whether thought-controlling means (no matter how good their intentions) can lead to freely thinking ends. As soon as



Illustration by Abro

critical pedagogy is placed in the dominant education system, it must conform to the hidden curriculum: controlling students through testing, ranking, punishment, rewards, competition and hierarchies (whereby they learn total deference to experts and professionals).

The hidden curriculum also means dividing knowledge into discrete disciplines, separating human beings from nature and from manual labour, and breaking intergenerational bonds of learning. Therefore, although critical pedagogy may offer youth strong critiques of the nation-state, mass media and market economy, unless it simultaneously challenges the rest of the hidden curriculum, it will be helping to foster the attitudes, desires and mindsets that fuel and expand