Critical Thinking or Cultural Reproduction?
Fostering Empathetic Intersectional Awareness in Students Not Like Us

Introduction

Critical thinking is held as one of the highest goods in education—the ability to foster critical thinking in the classroom dominates teaching statements, university mission statements, and professional cover letters. As it has been defined in the last several decades, critical thinking is often connected to one’s ability to remain unbiased and unemotional, rationally weighing different conjectures and choosing between competing ideas in the most sensical ways possible. It is no surprise, then, that in theological education, critical thinking is at risk of being at odds with religious faith that privileges the experiential or spiritual. When critical thinking is defined through concepts like objectivity and rationality, the belief in that which is subjective and irrational suggests a negation of critical thinking.

I quickly learned in my own theological education that while my hard questions of faith drove a wedge between me and my family, these questions were affirmed and celebrated by my professors as a sign of theological maturity in line with Paul’s description of “putting away childish ways” when he grew up and stopped understanding as a child.1 It felt as if I was embraced into the club of religious skeptics and the dues of membership included a sacrifice of my previous religious community and all they believed in, including the comfort and support that faith can bring. My new academic membership brought me great pride for awhile, even if it complicated my relationship with my childhood faith tradition. I truly believed I had evolved as a person—that is, until a pastoral care genogram assignment required I interview my elderly grandfather about his life experiences. He described to me moments of deep grief and substantial loss, stories that are well-known in the Appalachian region of the country where he grew up. For the first time, I saw his love for the hymn, “I’ll Fly Away” in a new light. My new skeptical self had criticized longing for another world as socially irresponsible because I believed we were called to focus on making this world better; with my new skeptical perspective I no longer cared if Heaven existed. However, I felt something in my identity shift back into place when I spoke to my working class grandfather who, even without a formal high school diploma, had studied the Bible just as much, if not more, than any scholar I knew. For him, Heaven’s existence was not about a dismissal of responsibility for this world, it was about God’s promise that the death of this world was not the end.

Critical thinking is not the problem. In fact, critical thinking is what allowed my new skeptical self to realize that the faith my grandfather had passed down to his children and then to me was a valid response to the lived experiences of my family and the community in which they were embedded. Critical thinking prepared me to recognize the class-boundedness in privileging

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1 1 Corinthians 13:11.
certain expressions of faith and religion over others simply because some were considered to be more “critically thoughtful” than others. While I had learned to speak the language of upper middle class mainline Christianity, I did so at the expense of my connection with my working class evangelical family. In this way, the encouragement to “think critically” about the world implicitly called for a type of cultural assimilation that is always the risk of education, one that Bourdieu warns of in his writings on cultural reproduction.²

This complication of critical thinking in theological education has been explored before, particularly in Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts, edited by Mary Hess and Stephen Brookfield, that questions the discourse between teachers, students, and content.³ In my paper, I am adding a layer of intersectional analysis to the conversation already started by that volume. An increasing understanding of knowledge as socially constructed already challenges an older definition of critical thinking as being unbiased and rational, and this shift invites us to reimagine what we mean when we call for critical thinking in the classroom. What I propose is that modeling and teaching what I call empathetic intersectional consciousness is a way to redefine critical thinking that does not force assimilation, but rather, a critical perspective of difference and power. This would require that educators account for what they mean when they privilege “critical thinking” in the classroom so that the mantle of critical thinking does not get confused with cultural reproduction, or rather, student mimicry of positions and ideologies their teachers profess. In other words, theological educators can foster classrooms of critical thinking without unconsciously privileging their own conclusions by continuously interrogating their own intersectional identities and calling on students to do the same in order to examine the roots and limits of socially constructed knowledge.

Defining critical thinking in the literature

In Critical Thinking and Learning, Mark Mason sketches out three main schools of thought on the concept of critical thinking: 1) critical thinking as the ability to reason through concepts properly, 2) critical thinking that consists of a deep knowledge in a particular discipline, within which a person can critically think rooted in competence in the field, and 3) a moral orientation that is “motivated by a concern for a more humane and just world.”⁴ As is often the case, there seems to be a distance between scholarship and practice of teaching critical thinking, a taking for granted that practitioners naturally know what critical thinking consists of apart from the scholarship on the different forms of critical thinking that any given person could be referring to when they boast of privileging critical thinking. In this way, many teachers are operating under a kind of “I’ll know it when I see it” model of critical thinking—which leaves them as the final judges over if a student has successful acquired the skill.

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Even as a leading writer in the field of critical pedagogy, and someone our field draws on frequently, bell hooks starts her book on critical thinking by quoting a definition of critical thinking as “seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.” Her own description calls the “longing to know—to understand how life works” the “heartbeat of critical thinking.”

She references many definitions of critical thinking, but all of them imply an ability to be emotionally removed and intellectually distant from the material proposed, so that one can reason through concepts and evaluate them accordingly. In this way, she seems to be operating under Mason’s first definition of critical thinking, even while he includes a third definition that refers to a moral disposition rather than cultivated skills.

It is not that critical thinking cannot refer to multiple concepts at once; Mason himself says that one of the three definitions is usually emphasized, though two might be functioning together. One might say that in theological education, critical thinking refers both to a skill set and a disposition, rooted in a conviction that what we teach and study is sacred and demands reverence, not just dispassionate objectivism. In Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts, Brookfield and Hess describe a model of public engagement, or a transparency of the teacher in how she/he is making decisions on behalf of the class to show critical thought processes and how they are engaged in. This vulnerability is similar to bell hooks admonition that teachers ought not demand more vulnerability from their students than they are willing to express themselves. So at the very same time that critical thinking and the teaching of critical thinking as practice is often described as a process that requires emotional distance, it is also described as a vulnerable act. This vulnerability may be even more pronounced when a person’s religious experiences and theological commitments that they have been taught to hold as sacred are up for public negotiation in the classroom for the sake of critical thinking.

The problem with defining critical thinking as an objective practice of weighing different concepts and evaluating them properly and skillfully, particularly in theological education, is that this definition overlooks the social construction of knowledge and formal schooling’s propensity and history for reproducing social power through the reinforcement of dominant ideas and concepts. In short, the concept of critical thinking as a set of skills to evaluate concepts lacks a proper acknowledgement of how power works in discourse. First, if critical thinking is really unbiased, the outcomes of critical thinking ought to be more similar than different. If there is truly a way to dispassionately examine ideas and choose the most rational and sensible

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6 hooks, 7.

7 Mason, 5.

8 Hess and Brookfield, 13.

9 hooks, 21.
assertions, then our students would be led to align their views with our own—the goal being to show how our own convictions were reasonable ascertained and worth embracing as one’s own, even if we do not mean to teach conformity. However, there is little room for subjectivity in an understanding of critical thinking that is driven by objectivism.

Accordingly, postmodernism has described knowledge as socially constructed, and one way this can be described is through the concept intersectionality. Intersectional analysis acknowledges that one is shaped by their intersecting social identities, formed by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other ways of being and moving in the world. An admission that who we are and what we know being influenced by these forces of identity and experience precludes the idea that critical thinking could be unbiased and objective, as if truth is a matter of simply determining between two or more competing concepts. Pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay names intersectionality “an epistemological resource that helps surface subjugated knowledge and creates new knowledge,” explaining that it is thusly “a strategic resource for transformational change.” Intersectionality is not just a source of explanatory value, but epistemological value, influencing the very way people think as we explain in postmodern terms. Whereas traditionally knowledge has been defined in objected truth-driven terms, a postmodern approach recognizes the very ways what we convey as truth are bound by our social locations, not as an extra bonus after the evaluation of truth claims, but as the substantive building blocks to how we understand truth. In this way, an intersectional consciousness of epistemology is essential to the understanding and teaching of critical thinking.

Critical thinking as empathetic intersectional consciousness

The danger of describing the social construction of knowledge is the inevitable panic over extreme relativism—particularly when many of us as theological educators have deeper values and convictions to which we are also accountable. In other words, how could we teach critical thinking as subjective if it means each person gets to think what they want without critique because their social locations should not be attacked? Here is where I would like to propose an alternative description of critical thinking: critical thinking as the ability to hold empathetic intersectional consciousness in the face of differing worldviews, concepts, and perspectives. My proposal includes two adjectives, empathetic and intersectional, and each of them should be taken in turn. First, I am calling for a teaching of empathy in the strictest sense by definition rather than the more colloquial confluence of empathy as sympathy. Empathy refers to the ability to understand a person’s perspective and feelings without collapsing one’s own self into the other. When we teach empathy in intercultural spiritual care, we teach the dual ability to be strong in one’s own identity while showing an authentic reverence and curiosity for the spiritual world of another. Empathy empowers us to not only respect another perspective as distant and other, but it also challenges our own perspective when we consider how another might interpret our views and words, and how another perspective might serve more people than our own.

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For example, on a recent drive, I heard a radio commercial for the cancer center of a local hospital. The fundraising advertisement included the story of a cancer survivor that spoke of the need to know she could beat cancer; she said her doctors at this hospital gave her the confidence to beat cancer even when she thought she would lose. While I honor her and her perspective, particularly in its context of being a survival narrative that carried her through unthinkable pain, I could not help but cringe when I imagined how a person whose loved one did not beat cancer might hear the same message. While some would hear the commercial as a testament of faith and strength in the face of cancer, others might hear an accusation that their loved ones did not have the confidence they needed to “win” against what may have been a terminable diagnosis. Since I was working on this essay at the time, I wondered how empathetic critical thinking may have resulted in a different type of messaging from the cancer center. Perhaps in that marketing meeting, someone would have suggested what this proposed message might sound like to someone who had lost a loved one to cancer—pointing out that the implication is that their loved one lacked the confidence to “beat cancer.” The result might have been either the change of message or the complication of this simplistic message by including a counter-narrative, both of which would reflect the concept of critical thinking as a moral disposition in as much as it would embody an intentional compassionate concern for those who have been hurt by cancer. This ability to imagine the thought process of another person, particularly as it is shaped by their experience, is one of the benefits of imagining an empathetic critical thinking, and this particular example demonstrates a value beyond theological education to other fields and disciplines, like students of healthcare or business.

When applied to critical thinking, empathetic intellect would seek to understand the reasons behind difference, trusting that there are respectable reasons a person might come to a different conclusion than another, beyond simplistic definitions of right and wrong. A postmodern understanding of the social construction of knowledge theoretically should result in more intellectual empathy afforded one another, but instead, it seems to have closed people off to needing to understand difference out of conviction of one’s own truth. This type of empathy, then, needs to be taught as a skill worth fostering and modeled as a moral commitment to the other. Fostering empathy as part of critical thinking also safeguards against the accusation of relativism by encouraging a commitment to dismantling systems of injustice and oppression through its acknowledgement of the lived experience of the other, so that critical thinking is not just self-serving, but held within a web of life that is complicated and messy. There is still an evaluative aspect of this sort of critical thinking, just rather than an objective evaluation of multiple perspectives, it is a subjective understanding of why multiple perspectives exist that demands an evaluation that is mindful of the social realities surrounding any single issue. In moral and theological education, this allows for a taught privileging of marginalized voices in opposition to a long history of “objectivism” that privileged dominant race and class values. Including empathy as part of critical thinking fits into the model of critical thinking as moral disposition because it requires students to consider not only the validity of another’s perspective, but the power imbalances between different perspectives that might perpetuate oppression.

The second descriptor used in my proposal is intersectional, and this is closely connected to empathy. Empathy flows out of a recognition that we ourselves hold values and beliefs for very particular reasons, and intersectionality gives us a framework to examine how and why
these views are formed. In her critical article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Kimberle Crenshaw explained that sexism was rarely described or analyzed from a particular racial perspective, proposing that the different parts of a person’s identity, like race and class, intersected and that the intersection demanded particular analysis. Carrie Doehring and Nancy Ramsay represent efforts out of my own fields of practical and pastoral theology to recognize intersectionality, which is demonstrated in their descriptions of the way a person’s values have been shaped by their ethnicity, social class, race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. This recognition is done at the scholarly level for integrity’s sake and at the caregiving level for the sake of not imposing the caregiver’s own worldview on those with whom they work, but I am suggesting that this disposition should be taught more universally as part of critical thinking, rather than constrained to the fields of pastoral care and counseling. Once I understand that my experience in the world is shaped by my whiteness, my femaleness, my working class childhood that gave way to a more middle class adulthood, then perhaps I can grant that someone who has a different conviction than me is also shaped by their social location in logical and valid ways. It removes the hastiness of my evaluation between myself as right and the other as wrong, but it also prevents me from being able to objectively evaluate both positions side by side and choose the most “critical thinking approved” route.

An empathetic intersectional consciousness, then, would consist of an awareness of the forces of one’s own identity that shaped the way they view the world, an understanding that other person’s have their own intersectional identities that influence how they view the world, and a commitment to evaluating differences as they relate to power, privilege, and oppression in the world.

**Practicing critical thinking in the classroom**

While it is common in pastoral care classrooms to teach this sort of empathetic intersectional consciousness through the creation of genograms, it is not practical to expect that every classroom setting in any field of study can dig into family history and context to explain how one’s lived experiences in the world has shaped their worldview and their construction of knowledge and truth. However, there are classroom activities that can initiate this sort of reflection that would hopefully continue long past the course of the term.

First, teachers can encourage intersectional consciousness through mapping exercises that are not as extensive as the genogram. I and other teachers have experienced success in having

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13 Genograms include a mapping of family history that goes beyond birth and death dates, but include attention to relationships, mental health, physical health, and connection. However, one of my colleagues who read an early draft of this paper pointed out that genograms do not require one to analyze power difference and societal location unless this sort of analysis is intentionally assigned and encouraged by the instructor. So while this is one way pastoral care course *might* teach empathetic intersectional consciousness, the simple assignment of genograms does not guarantee it.
students map their conceptions of identity, even for their own reference, throughout the course. In a class on identity, power, and difference I have co-taught with another, we provided the paper and a model diagram of how a student might take continuous self-reflective notes about their own intersectionality throughout the course, culminating in a section of their final paper in which they reported a self-analysis of intersectional influence in their lives and how it impacts their experiences and interpretation of the world. Other teachers have no doubt included similar activities in their courses through journaling assignments and even assessments that gauge values, privilege, and identity.

In *Teaching for Critical Thinking*, Stephen D. Brookfield offers up the idea of “hunting assumptions” as an important practice in critical thinking, and this language is useful in the everyday moments of teaching critical thinking in the classroom as it is easy enough to understand, even if it is more difficult in practice. “Trying to discover what our assumptions are, and then trying to judge when, and how far, these are accurate,” Brookfield explains, “is something that happens every time critical thinking occurs.” The importance Brookfield places on hunting assumptions fits in naturally with my proposal of critical thinking as empathetic intersectional consciousness because it requires an acknowledgement of our underlying beliefs and how we form them, and the natural extension is an awareness that others have similar processes in how the interpret their worlds as well. It is not simply a subjective awareness that each of us have assumptions we make that seem natural to us, but a demand that we analyze how our assumptions are made and how these assumptions function in a society that privileges some people and their assumptions over others. One exercise Brookfield proposes for teaching students how to identify assumptions is through case studies in which they are asked to identify someone else’s assumptions. This could be used in theological education both in practical ministry courses that already use case studies and in more theory-driven courses by asking students to examine the construction of an argument by identifying one a scholar might be taking for granted about the audience of the text.

There is a strategy used by Industrial Areas Foundation, a nationwide community organizing group, that is also a helpful concept for certain contexts of teaching critical thinking, particularly in congregational settings. Rather than organizing around issues first, they teach and encourage *relational meetings*, one-on-one meetings in which two people get to know not only the simple biographic facts about another person, but the deeper stories and experiences that shaped the other person—their passions, commitments, and beliefs. This strategy pushes people to ask questions that elicit thoughtful answers, such as “What keeps you up at night?” or “What gets you up in the morning?” In community organizing, the hope is that people find shared passions in these stories and that community action initiatives arises out of these relational meetings rather than being imposed upon strangers. This model for connection could influence the teaching of critical thinking by training one to look beyond another’s different stated beliefs.

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15 Brookfield, 90.
to how their intersectional identities have brought them to that point and how those experiences might impact one’s own belief system.

Lastly, a teacher’s own identity matters in the classroom and in the mission of teaching critical thinking. In *Teaching Reflectively*, Hess and Brookfield describe how reflective practice models critical thinking in the classroom by sharing with the students why the teacher makes the decisions in the classroom that they do. Teachers can demonstrate that they themselves are in processes of struggling through content, continually being changed and formed by what they read and learn so that students understand firsthand that these are valuable dynamics. One way to do this, they write, is through the inclusion of Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ) at the end of each class session that would ask students to describe a moment of the class in which they felt engaged, a moment in which they felt distanced, an action someone took that was helpful, an action someone took that was confusing, and a moment in class in which they were surprised.\(^\text{16}\) These questionnaires would then give the teacher insight into how students felt the class was going and allow for teachers to engage with the students about the reasons for certain pedagogical decisions, as well as the potential for pedagogical changes in the future. This is a useful strategy for teaching empathetic intersectional consciousness because students and teachers must both acknowledge the different contexts from which each other are operating and navigate the inherent power differential that divides them, making these analyses more in line with intersectional perspectives that gauge who is being privileged at any given time with more power and/or control in a situation.

Furthermore, it is a teacher’s own empathetic intersectional consciousness that prevents her from imposing the views she has arrived at through her own experience onto that of her students. When a teacher loses sight of his own intersectionality, he risks taking on the kind of hubris that so privileges one worldview that he cannot help but privilege the students that affirm his own biases. It is not rare for any of us to fall into this trap—I can remember in my first classroom getting caught up in the excitement of a student whose questions raised in class reminded me of myself when I was first introduced to the content. This excitement was obvious to my students, and though reacting affirmatively to students can be a way to empower them, our actions can also suggest a different kind of interpretation for other students that do not elicit such a reaction. Looking back, I recognize that my excitement for the input of one student who affirmed my own bias was contrasted to a flatter reaction that same day to a student with a different interpretation of the material. My commitment to empathetically reflect on the experience allows me to see with fresh understanding the disappointment another student may have felt in comparison to the student who felt empowered, and I lament that I may have implicitly discouraged further engagement with the material that day from that student or other students that noticed the unequal treatment. My commitment to reflect on the intersectional dynamics reveals my accidental complicity in classroom racism that day too, as the student I felt connection to was a student of a lower class white background like myself, and so, it was easier to collapse our experiences into synchronicity than it would have been with one of her classmates of color. In that moment, I demonstrated a familiarity with a white student that I did not with her black classmate. While my flatter reaction was rooted in a need to think about the

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\(^\text{16}\) Hess and Brookfield, 6-7.
newness of what I had heard in comparison to assuming a recognition what I had heard from the other student, it was only obvious to my students that I reacted differently to one than the other. It is not that an empathetic intersectional consciousness would prevent all the ways in which we might unintentionally harm our students in complex ways, but had I thought this way back then, I would have been able to acknowledge what had happened as a model of vulnerability and critical thinking by discussing the classroom moment with the class itself—acknowledging and repenting for the hurt I may have caused and demonstrating the transformative power of empathetic intersectional consciousness.

Conclusion

An insistence that critical thinking demands the ability to objectively evaluate facts, figures, and ideas risks ignoring the issues of power and privilege that are inherent in what people know and believe to be true. Teaching empathetic intersectional consciousness provides us a way to affirm the social construction of knowledge that is often described in postmodern thought without collapsing the world into radical relativism. We can do this by teaching students to recognize how their intersectional identities influence the assumptions they make about the world and how their assumptions bump up against others who are also shaped by their social locations. It is in this interchange that questions about power and injustice arrive, as we imagine what it must like to view the world in a different way, choosing to lift up those who have been traditionally marginalized by the illusion of unbiased objectivity that privileged those with more social power. This is how we can teach critical thinking without imposing cultural reproduction: by insisting upon and modeling an awareness of the intersectional limitations of our own perspectives and the need for empathy in every moment of life and learning.

Bibliography


