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The Four Lenses of Critical Reflection

Assumptions are slippery little things that usually can't be seen clearly by an act of self-will. One particular metaphor comes to mind whenever I think of someone trying to uncover their assumptions by deep introspective analysis and that's being in a clothing store. When you're out on the floor trying on your new jacket you have only one mirror view—the front on view you see every day. But step into a changing room with side mirrors and suddenly you see how you look from multiple perspectives. You gain a fuller picture of yourself, one that represents the ways you look in a 360-degree perspective.

The only way we can become aware of our assumptions, particularly ones we've missed or never been aware of, is to view what we do through the equivalent of the side mirrors in the clothing booth. We need to be able to see ourselves from unfamiliar angles. No matter how much we think we have a full and accurate picture of our practice we're always stymied by our personal limitations. It's impossible to become aware of our own interpretive filters by using those same interpretive filters. This is as futile as a dog furiously chasing its tail.

To some extent we're all prisoners trapped within the frameworks we use to assign meaning to our experience. A self-confirming cycle often develops in which our assumptions shape our actions that are then interpreted to confirm the truth of those assumptions. But the four lenses of critical reflection each

illuminate a different part of our teaching. Taken together they throw our assumptive clusters into sharp relief by providing multiple perspectives on what we think and do. As already outlined in the opening chapter, these lenses are students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory, and personal experience. In this chapter I want to outline what using each of these lenses entails.

Students' Eyes

In *The Skillful Teacher* (Brookfield, 2015b) I argue that the most important pedagogic knowledge we teachers need to do good work is an awareness, week in, week out, of how our students are experiencing learning. Without this knowledge we are working largely in the dark. In order to make good decisions about the ways we organize learning, construct assignments, sequence instruction, and apply specific classroom protocols we need to know what's going on in students' heads. This is the essence of student-centered teaching: knowing how your students experience learning so you can build bridges that take them from where they are now to a new destination.

Discovering how different students in the same classroom see us is one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher's career. Applying one or more of the many classroom assessment techniques available (Butler and McNunn, 2006; Earl, 2012) helps us get inside students' heads and see the classroom as they do. Each time you do this you learn something.

Sometimes the data is reassuring, such as when you find that a method or exercise you employ has the effect you intend for it. It's just as important to know when your assumptions are broadly confirmed as it is to know when they're in error. I need to know that my students are hearing what I want them to hear and seeing what I want them to see. For example, knowing how much students learn from a relevant personal story has encouraged me to work autobiographically whenever it makes sense to do so. Similarly,

having learned that students appreciate my constantly talking out loud about my classroom process, I pay special attention to explain the rationale for each new classroom activity before we go into it.

At other times we're stopped in our tracks to discover the diversity of meanings students read into our words and actions. Students hear as imperatives comments we've made unthinkingly that have no particular significance to us. Answers we give off the cuff to what seem like inconsequential questions are later quoted back to us to prove that now we're contradicting ourselves. What we think is reassuring behavior is interpreted as overprotective coddling. What we deem as an inspired moment of creativity on our part that builds spontaneously on an important teachable moment is seen as inconsistent or confusing. What we regard as a lighthearted remark is appreciated by some but seen as an insult by others.

The chief dynamic to consider when using the lens of students' eyes is that of power. Because of our power to award grades and sanction student progress it's not surprising that people are understandably reluctant to be honest with us. Teachers who say they welcome criticism often react very differently when they actually receive it. Some students will have learned that giving honest commentary on a teacher's actions can backfire horribly. It takes a courageous or foolhardy individual to suggest in class that teachers have unwittingly stifled free discussion, broken promises, or played favorites. And, I have to say that given the egomania of some academics, student paranoia is completely justified.

What will help teachers get accurate information from students is anonymity. Students who are genuinely sure that their responses are anonymous are much more likely to tell the truth. So when you request honest and anonymous feedback from a particular class you must demonstrate that you have no idea who is saying what. After students have seen you openly discussing their feedback on the class several times they may decide you're trustworthy enough to speak honestly with you. But never assume that students believe your assurances that you welcome critique, even if you're totally

sincere. You need to model a non-defensive gratitude for student criticisms for a sustained period before people will start to take you seriously.

The importance of responding non-defensively to anonymous student feedback is crucial. I've seen far too many colleagues react to criticisms by immediately trying to explain them away. They might not say outright that the students are wrong, but they'll correct students by saying that the point of a particular exercise was clearly not understood, or they'll re-justify why an activity that's been criticized was actually worth doing. In terms of teaching, and in leadership generally, this is an absolute no-no. When you receive negative criticism, even if you think it's fundamentally misguided, you need to start by thanking people for the time they spent giving the criticism. Then, if any part of the criticism is unclear you should ask for people to volunteer clarification, assuring them that no one has to identify him- or herself as the source of the criticism.

When the criticism opens up a new perspective for you then that should be acknowledged. If it highlights a problem that you haven't been aware of you should explain how you're going to try to deal with it. If the criticism asks you to do something that you feel is fundamentally wrong, then you stand your ground by explaining and re-justifying why you can't do what's requested. In leadership classes I often get asked to stop harping on race and have to keep clarifying that for me being aware of racial dynamics is a crucial element of effective leadership. But I try never to blame students for feedback or get irritated with its naivety. It's crucial that you show you take it seriously even when you fundamentally disagree with it.

Sometimes teachers protest that soliciting student feedback takes far too much time and means they can't adequately cover all the content that students need to know in order to move forward in their studies. To this point I always respond the same way. If getting students to understand content correctly is your main job, then the only way you can do this job is to keep checking

in that this is happening. Just asking students, "are you following me?" or "is that clear?" is pretty worthless. I can count on the fingers of one hand the times in my life when I've seen students say the equivalent of "actually, no, we don't understand what you're saying." Students will be wary of publicly admitting that they're confused or not following your explanations. But if you institute regular opportunities for students to provide anonymous information on how they're understanding content you'll be much better placed to know whether or not you need to revisit some earlier material, re-explain something, or quicken the pace.

The only way we can know if students are learning what we intend for them to learn is by checking in with them. Sure, you can wait for a midterm exam to find out that things have gone awry, but isn't it better to know as soon as possible that students aren't understanding the all-important content? That way you can adjust or take remedial steps before things get worse and too much time has passed. This deliberately utilitarian justification neatly sidesteps the usual "all this participatory stuff is fine if you had the time but I've got too much content to cover" argument I often hear.

The lens of students' eyes has been the most important of the four critically reflective lenses in my own career and that's why I begin with it. When you understand the different ways students view your practice it can open up productively disturbing insights for you. Assumptions that you believed to be self-evidently true are sometimes shown to be without real empirical foundation.

When it comes to understanding the power dynamics of classrooms I don't see how you can possibly know what these are without regular anonymous student feedback. Many times I've been stopped in my tracks by student comments regarding the exercise of my authority, particularly when I think I'm being transparent, but students see me as shifty or evasive. I've also come to understand the essentials of an ethical use of authority much better: the need to respond non-defensively to criticisms, the need to model my own engagement in any risky activity I'm asking people to do,

and the importance of self-disclosure. To me the lens of students' eyes is the Rosetta stone needed to decode assumptions of power.

Colleagues' Perceptions

The presence of critical friends is at the heart of the critically reflective process. A critical friend is someone who strives to help you unearth and check your assumptions and opens you up to new perspectives about familiar problems. When we hit experiential bumps in the road of life or encounter the disorienting dilemmas beloved of transformative learning theorists, the first thing many of us do is run to our best friends. Your truest friends are those who stand by you when you're in trouble. They provide a sympathetic ear as you talk out whatever grief or frustration you're going through. Sometimes this helps you come to new insights about your situation and discover how to deal with it.

The best teaching colleagues are critical friends. They'll encourage you to describe a problem as you see it, take the time to ask you questions about it, and suggest different ways of thinking it through. Institutions may force us to teach solo, and staff meetings may focus on policies, personnel, and organizational difficulties, but in corridors, cafeterias, and sometimes online the real work of teaching is shared. The biggest difficulty I faced as a part-time, adjunct teacher was not having a trusted group of colleagues, or even a single person, I could talk to about the things I was experiencing. Without the need to pay rent I never would have made it through that first year.

Talking to colleagues unravels the shroud of silence in which our work is wrapped. It's one of the many reasons why I prefer team teaching (Plank, 2011). To have a colleague who helps you debrief the class you've just taught and who alerts you to things (positive and negative) you've missed is extremely helpful for your own efforts to check your assumptions about what's happening. In reflection groups talking about classroom dynamics that you think

are unique to you usually prompts colleagues to disclose how they negotiate those same dynamics. Sometimes they'll describe a very different interpretation of a situation than the one you hold. This helps you check, verify, or reframe the assumptions you've brought to your own analysis of it.

Some of the best conversations I've had with colleagues concern the nature of resistance to learning. Because I'm a driven, type A personality, I want to do good work and teach classes full of eagerly motivated students. Throughout my career I've had a specific image of a good class. It's one in which everybody says something, there are no awkward silences, students ask provocative and pertinent questions, and there are multiple nonverbal indications of student engagement. People sit on the edge of their chairs leaning forward, their eyes ablaze with enthusiasm, interspersed with frequent nods of recognition, and smiles of appreciation. This unrealistic and naive image is so far removed from what actually happens in most of my classes that I'm constantly fixated on why students seem to be resisting the learning I'm urging on them.

Over the years colleagues have suggested to me some very different readings of, and perspectives on, student resistance. I've realized that students' resistance to my efforts is sometimes grounded in events that happened before I showed up. For example, one year I taught a course that had been identified with a much loved-teacher who didn't get tenure. Not surprisingly, I got a frosty reaction from students in the department. Even if I don't receive a startling new insight from a colleague on why students seem disengaged it's helpful to know I'm not alone. Pretty much every time I ask a colleague to help talk me through a problem I'm facing, that colleague tells me how she or he is also dealing with it. At the very least this makes me feel I'm not a total impostor.

Faculty learning communities—groups of colleagues from across the disciplines coming together to explore a shared problem—provide another avenue of collegial feedback (Felton, Bauman, Kheriaty, and Taylor, 2013; Lenning, Hill, Saunders,

Solan, and Stokes, 2013; Palmer and Zajonc, 2010). During the writing of this book I co-led such a community that focused on exploring racial dynamics in college classrooms. From disciplines as diverse as biology, theology, physics, and art history we shared experiences of both white teachers and teachers of color dealing with expressions of racism in our classes and also approaches to raising racial issues with reluctant students.

In my experience the best teacher-reflection groups are those composed of people from multiple disciplines: art history to engineering, management to theology. Discipline-specific groups have an initial ease but often come to early conclusions. Multidisciplinary groups quickly discover that the problems they face are remarkably similar: how to work with underprepared students, how to sequence curriculum, how to design assignments that test student knowledge accurately, and so on. But the specific ways people describe how they accomplish these tasks in their own subjects varies widely. I have found that people are more likely to discover genuinely new ways to think about problems in multidisciplinary work groups than in discipline-specific ones.

To sum up, when colleagues function as critical friends they affirm that our problems are not idiosyncratic blemishes that we need to keep hidden but shared dilemmas. They help us sort out how we frame a problem and whether the problem we're obsessing about is the real problem we need to deal with. They offer multiple perspectives and viewpoints on a situation and help us decide what parts of our analysis or response are valid and what needs reexamining. Although critical reflection typically is conceptualized and practiced as a solo endeavor, it's actually a collective enterprise. A conversation, whether mediated or unmediated, synchronous or asynchronous, in which colleagues are genuinely seeking to understand how you experience a problem and then reflect back to you their own interpretations and reactions to it, is a fantastic way to open people up to new ways of thinking and acting.

Personal Experience

Of the four lenses of critical reflection this is the lens that gets the least respect. This is because western epistemology is still dictated by its Enlightenment roots and the birth of scientism. This epistemology holds that accurate knowledge is created through the application of protocols developed and monitored by a community of scholars alert to individual subjective bias. Truth is established when the accumulation of insights derived from these applications coalesce into a theory explaining a discrete part of the world. The most effective academic put-down is to dismiss a view or proposition as "merely anecdotal," in other words, as hopelessly subjective or impressionistic. Academic research that investigates personal experience through stories (Shadlow, 2013) or scholarly personal narratives (Nash and Viray, 2013, 2014) has a hard time being accepted as legitimate inside the academy.

Yet accounts of personal experience typically move us more than summaries of findings in a research study. Politicians know that you secure support for a policy by embedding your case for it in a personal story. When I think of the factors that shape how I teach, it's personal experiences of particular teachers that come to mind rather than theories I've studied or research reports I've read. Yet when personal experience is dropped into a conversation about teaching it's often prefaced by someone saying, "of course I've got no real evidence for this; it's just my own experience" as if your own experience should be discounted as inherently invalid.

One of the most stringent objections to taking personal experience seriously is that it's unique and therefore ungeneralizable. It's true that at one level experience is idiosyncratic. No one experiences the death of a parent in exactly the same way as anyone else, with the same mix of memories intertwined into the grief and pain. Yet predictable rhythms of bereavement with their dynamics of denial, anger, and acceptance are discernible across multiple lives.

Specific experiences always have universal elements embedded within them.

The fact that people recognize aspects of their experiences in the stories others tell is one of the appeals of the collegial teacher-reflection groups I described previously. This is why support groups for those going through periods of crisis or transition are so crucial. When I describe how I constantly feel like an impostor I can see the light of mutual recognition dawn in people's eyes. As you hear someone telling how he stopped cancer defining his life, responded to depression, struggled with addiction, or dealt with the death of someone she cared about, you'll hear echoes of, and sometimes direct parallels to, your own experience. The details and characters may differ from case to case, but many of the tensions and dilemmas are the same.

Personal experiences of learning are intertwined with teaching practice. All of us gravitate seemingly instinctively toward certain ways of working. Some teachers rely on group work, others on independent study. Some are compelled to stick to preannounced plans; others delight in breaking away from structures and building on unexpected events. I would argue that we can trace the impulse for many of these decisions back to the kinds of situations in which we felt excited or confused as learners. We assume that what worked for us will be similarly galvanizing for our own students. How we've been bored or engaged as learners, what approaches and activities have helped or inhibited our understanding, which of our teachers made a difference for us and which we felt were a waste of space—all these elements are far more influential than we often realize.

Let me use myself as an example. As a student I was a bad test taker. No matter how hard or long I studied, when I entered the exam room my anxiety was so strong it was hard for me to focus. Consequently, I have a history of failing exams. This means that as a teacher I try to introduce multiple forms of student assessment. I always give second chances, am open to renegotiating aspects of the curriculum, and assume that when students say they need more

time they're telling the truth. This is directly a result of my own bad experience with closed-book exams.

Or take the way I run discussions. As a student I hated speaking up in discussions and got very nervous when required to do so. I felt I never sounded smart enough or never had anything worthwhile to say. So I'd stay silent and as much as possible let other students take the risk of speaking up. I was actively thinking about the content of what was being talked about and struggling to understand the different viewpoints expressed, but I just hated opening my mouth.

Because of this experience I structure my own discussions in very specific ways. I use a rubric to grade participation that emphasizes listening and responding rather than speaking a lot or sounding smart. My discussion protocols are designed for introverts and contain specific periods for silent reflection. Some have no speech at all. With my colleague Steve Preskill I've written two books specifically on the dynamics and protocols of discussion (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005, 2016) and pretty much every one of the discussion activities we suggest springs to some degree from my personal experiences as a student participating in discussions.

When it comes to investigating student disengagement or student hostility and resistance to learning, personal experience has provided one of the most fruitful sources of data for me. I simply have to ask myself what typically causes me to disengage from activities in conference sessions, professional development workshops, or faculty meetings. The top ten answers are immediate and clear:

- I don't see the reason why I'm being asked to do a particular activity.
- The instructions provided are unclear.
- The time allowed for it is too short.
- The leader has not demonstrated any commitment to the activity.
- I fail to see how this activity will do anything for me or my colleagues.

- I don't have any experience or knowledge that would enable me to participate.
- I've been burned by participating in similar activities in the past.
- I don't trust the leader.
- I don't want to say anything for fear of looking stupid.
- I'm tired and can't be bothered.

None of these reasons for my disengagement are particularly earth-shattering or dramatic. But associated with each of these reasons are some very vivid personal experiences. I recall faculty meetings in which small-group discussions were called on significant matters with hardly any time allowed for deep conversation. I remember task force meetings in which input was asked for but no guarantee that it would be taken seriously was demonstrated. I remember conference sessions in which presenters asked for early input from the audience that would shape the presentation and then delivered what had clearly been preplanned. And I remember small-group discussions in which the leader said all viewpoints were welcome and then made it subtly clear that some were off limits.

It takes no time at all to remember each of these incidents, and they teach me important lessons. I know I have to be very clear in explaining what's going on and why it's necessary and helpful. I have to make sure I model my own commitment to an activity before asking anyone else to do it. I have to allow sufficient time and not feel I have to cram everything that's important to me into a space that feels rushed for participants. I have to make sure a discussion is one that students bring relevant knowledge to. I have to create opportunities for anonymous participation. And I must never make a promise that I'm not prepared to keep.

Theory

The final lens of critical reflection—theory—is the hardest sell. Time and time again I hear teachers say they don't have time to

read or that educational theory and research really doesn't have anything to do with the particularities of their classrooms. It's strange to hear a mistrust of theory voiced by educators, but I also understand why they feel that way. As a writer on critical theory (Brookfield, 2004) I'm often frustrated by the way an activist-inclined body of work intended to bring about democratic socialist transformation can be written so obtusely. Similarly, the hostility of some academic journals to strongly personal descriptive writing means that the last place an instructor will go for help with a teaching problem is to the journal shelves in the library. I know in my own trajectory that I spent years while teaching at Columbia University (New York) writing articles pretty much for the sole purpose of impressing the as-yet-unnamed members of my future tenure and full professor committee. It was only after getting tenure that I was free to write books that were meant to be helpful.

Yet reading theory can sometimes feel like coming home. You stumble on a piece of work that puts into cogent words something you've felt but been unable to articulate. Finding a theorist who makes explicit something you've been sensing or who states publicly what you've suspected privately but felt unable to express is wonderfully affirming. Thirty years ago I remember Paulo Freire in a "talking book" with Ira Shor (Shor and Freire, 1987) stating, "You can still be very critical lecturing. . . . The question is not banking lectures or no lectures, because traditional teachers will make reality opaque whether they lecture or lead discussions. A liberating teacher will illuminate reality even if he or she lectures. The question is the content and dynamism of the lecture, the approach to the object to be known. Does it critically re-orient students to society? Does it animate their critical thinking or not?" (p. 40). This clarified what I'd sensed was an overly simplistic element in my analysis of lectures as inherently authoritarian and discussions as inherently democratic.

When I first read Marcuse's (1965) comments on teaching through democratic discussion, it clarified for me some misgivings that had been bubbling under the surface. Democratic discussion's

intent is to honor and respect each learner's voice by valuing all contributions. But the implicit assumption that all contributions to a discussion carry equal weight means discussion leaders rarely point out when a contribution is skewed or just plain wrong. In Marcuse's view, the idea of democratizing discussion groups means that "the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with falsehood. This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad" (1965, p. 94).

This brief comment distilled something I'd felt but been queasy about owning up to. It challenged my reluctance to critique students' factual or reasoning errors and sent me on a journey to understand how to point these out without permanently shutting discussion down. Similarly, Baptiste's (2000, 2001) work on the use of ethical coercion in teaching made me realize how power relations are embedded in the most benign requests I make of students. For example, when I ask a group, "can we form into small groups please?" I'm not really asking a question. I'm *telling* the students to form into small groups. Again, my saying, "I'd like us to turn to page 80 if we can, please" is not an expression of personal preference that students can choose to follow or not. It's a direct instruction. Behind my language of facilitation or encouragement to students is a clear exercise of institutional power.

Theory can also crash into your life in a productively disturbing way by unsettling the groupthink arising from cultural norms and shared experiences. Theory that explodes settled worldviews is important because it combats the groupthink that sometimes emerges in collegial reflection groups. Institutionally sponsored groups, even those with members from very different disciplinary backgrounds and teaching very different kinds of students, nonetheless share a common organizational history and culture. Even at

a professional conference where you meet strangers from multiple institutions across the world there's still a disciplinary orientation present that defines what gets talked about and which sources of knowledge are taken seriously.

When a book presents an analysis of a familiar situation that catches you off guard and skews your world, this can be creatively dissonant. I've already talked about how reading Foucault (1980) totally changed the way I thought about power in my classrooms. Similarly, reading about the commission of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010, 2016), or the ways in which white educators engage in preaching and disdaining when working with supposedly less-enlightened whites (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness [(ECCW], 2010), challenged my self-image as a "good white person." This work productively disturbed my sense of myself as someone who was largely free of racism and was one of the "good guys" working for racial justice. Instead I began to investigate how racism lived in me and expressed itself through my actions, an investigation that has led me into a long experimentation with narrative disclosure as a tool of antiracist teaching (Brookfield, 2015A).

Conclusion

Since the first edition of this book appeared in 1995 there's been an explosion in programs and protocols that ask teachers to reflect on their pedagogic experiences. It's not uncommon for reflection to be institutionally mandated and for teachers' reflective capacities to be assessed. Although I'm all in favor of critical reflection and love to be involved with colleagues who are collectively hunting assumptions and opening themselves up to new perspectives, I'm troubled by the notion of mandating and assessing reflective practice. It's so easy for this to become instrumentalized and for reflection to be reduced to a reductionistic checklist: "I uncovered five assumptions this week," "I asked for student feedback in three

classes," "I read this article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*," and so on. Additionally, measures to assess teachers' capacity to reflect on personal experience are designed to record how this happens in individuals. This is a direct contradiction to the way teachers and other practitioners describe how it actually happens. In accounts from multiple educational and human services professions (Bradbury, Frost, Kilminster, and Zukas, 2010; Fook and Gardner, 2007, 2013), it's clear this is a collaborative endeavor.

Finally, there's a mandatory confessional tone to much of what passes for reflective practice. In an interesting application of Foucault's (1997) notion of confessional practices, Fejas (2016) points out how performance appraisals ask teachers to gaze into themselves: "to scrutinize their inner selves—that is, to turn their gaze towards who they 'truly are' and who they wish to become" (p. 8). There's a subtle trajectory implied in asking employees to reflect—what we might call the mandated confessional. Reporting in an end-of-year appraisal interview that your reflection has pretty much confirmed what you thought at the beginning of the year, that no new insights into teaching have emerged, and that no perspectives transformed is probably not going to cut it. What's called for is a dramatic transformation along the lines of "I used to hold this erroneous assumption but by reflecting on my practice I've transformed my experience and have a wholly new perspective."

So although I advocate for critical reflection (indeed chapter 5 extols its benefits at length) I'm suspicious of its mandatory measurement. When reflective assessment protocols are determined in advance, and teachers are required to show a suitable level of reflectivity to get reappointment, promotion, and tenure, the collaborative and collective dimension of reflection is entirely lost. Measuring reflection becomes a power play, a way for administrators to control employees by specifying the type of reflection that's permissible or legitimate. Instead of being a collective journey into mutual ambiguity it becomes a means of aligning individual actions and preferences with institutional needs.

The lenses explored in this chapter provide four different ways for teachers to look at what they do. All teachers have access to all of them, though the degree to which they can use a particular one depends on external constraints, the chief of which is time. The larger the class, the more complex is the process of seeing our teaching through students' eyes. Adjuncts shuttling between multiple institutions have little chance to form collegial relationships. Personal experience is easily discounted as subjective and unreliable, and good theory takes time to locate and study. But, as we shall see in chapter 5, when we try to build these lenses into our teaching we do better work.