

Creating a culture of thinking? Reflections on teaching an under- graduate Critical Social Psycho- logy course

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This article is a retrospective reflection on the experience of teaching a newly introduced third-year Critical Social Psychology course at the University of the Witwatersrand. Student evaluations and course presentation are discussed in order to critically reflect on the implications, if any, for nurturing critical thought and practice in students' work. While considering the content, structure, assessments and presentation of the course, this article examines the teachers' own learning and development of professional identity as teaching practitioners. Using Freire and Foucault's approaches to a critical pedagogy, the article highlights the importance of interrogation of student-teacher relations, as well as knowledge production in general.

'n Denkkultuur kultiveer? Nadenke oor die onderrig van 'n voorgraadse kursus in Kritiese Sosiale Sielkunde

Hierdie artikel bied 'n terugskouende oorsig van die ondervinding om 'n nuut-ingestelde derdejaarskursus in Sosiale Sielkunde aan die Universiteit van die Witwatersrand aan te bied. Studentevaluerings en kursusaanbieding word bespreek om die implikasies, indien enige, vir die kultivering van kritiese denke en praktyk in studentewerk, te oordink. Die artikel oorweeg dosente se eie leer- en professionele identiteitsontwikkeling deurkrities na te dink oor die inhoud, struktuur, assessering en aanbieding van die kursus. Volgens die benaderings van Freire en Foucault tot kritiese pedagogie, lig die artikel die belang uit van die ondersoek na student-dosentverhoudings, asook kennisproduksie in die algemeen.

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Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know (hooks 2003: xiv).

Hope is an ontological need [...] hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice (Freire 1995: 8-9).

The task of communicating broader concerns and practices of critical thinking to students may in some instances require a significant shift from “traditional” teaching practices.¹ This shift is not only necessary given the nature of the topics and issues addressed in the discipline, but perhaps even more so, given Critical Social Psychology’s emphasis on subversion of established knowledge practice. This article explores the nature of critical thinking; the orientation of a Critical Social Psychology course conceptualised by the authors; an engagement with the assessment tools used, with a particular emphasis on the weekly summary submissions; the role of traditional versus critical educational practices in light of Freire’s conception of critical consciousness, and personal reflexivity in the practice of cultivating professional teacher identity. McGinnis (Evans *et al* 1999: 295) defines as “taboo” those topics within social studies that teachers choose to “de-emphasize because of their perceptions or beliefs regarding the sensitivity of the topic”. For McGinnis, many teaching practitioners implicitly avoid these topics because they may potentially threaten “traditional” or mainstream belief systems and cultural practices. Yet the nature of social psychological enquiry as well as teaching requires some engagement with both social and political issues considered to be “sensitive” in nature, including those related to deeply entrenched social categories such as “race”, gender, class, and sexuality among others, as well as politicised issues of

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poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other pertinent social and political ills within society. These issues and topics become sensitive and “taboo” for various reasons for students and teachers alike. Considering the socio-historical and political contexts of a society, such as post-apartheid South Africa, these issues may present even greater difficulty as part of the curriculum and within the classroom context. Critical social psychologists have argued that mainstream Social Psychology has reneged its promise of addressing social problems within society in both an active and non-reductionist manner (cf Parker 1989, Ratele 2003). The objective of communicating the importance and role of these issues in the classroom thus becomes crucial, because the student’s primary and initial encounter with the epistemology, agendas and even orientation regarding the practice of the discipline occurs in the classroom. The role of the teacher in this regard becomes significant for how this status and practice of the discipline is communicated.

Teaching potentially “taboo” subjects, while necessary to a critical reflexive agenda, may also potentially be an exercise in frustration and futility for the teacher, often influenced by an implicit desire for comfort and neutrality which any active engagement with “disruptive” topics implicitly upsets. In addition, critically reflective engagement with such subject matter at times necessitates a personal investment in particular identities and subject positioning that are continually challenged and interrogated. This is not always a welcome position for both the teacher and the student. It is therefore easy to understand the adoption of more “neutral” and less threatening forms of engagement with these issues in the classroom. On the other hand, the commitment to nurturing critical thinking and active student engagement with “disruptive” or “sensitive” subject matter requires some degree of pedagogic reflection. In this regard, as part of an investigative study with first-year students in six South African tertiary institutions, Van den Berg (2000) highlights the importance of developing critical thinking skills among learners. Van den Berg’s study engages with some of the issues that are considered important for nurturing critical thinking skills as part of new transformation agendas in tertiary education. In addition, pertinent

issues regarding the nature of critical thinking are explored. This article considers some of the issues addressed by Van den Berg's study regarding the facilitation of critical learning in the classroom. At this point, however, it is important to note that, while the nature of teaching in Social Psychology will arguably nurture some degree of critical thought on the part of the learner regarding social issues in society more generally, the pedagogy of Critical Social Psychology requires that these issues be engaged with in an active manner, as well as by adopting critical teaching practices. Critical thinking, in this instance, is argued to be easily nurtured by using methods of teaching that are predominantly not repetitive of those traditional practices that tend to foster rote learning as well as passive positioning on the part of the learner. For these reasons, the presentation of the course typified a marked deviation from traditional forms of assessment and teaching practice.

This article is divided into two main sections. The first section presents the concept of critical thinking and its relevance to a critical pedagogy. This is followed by an overview of the Critical Social Psychology course – focusing on the orientation of the course as well as the assessment tools that were adopted – and a discussion of the theoretical frameworks of Paulo Freire's critical consciousness and Michel Foucault's discursive approach. This is followed by an overview of the procedures as well as the data analytic tool and a discussion of the results. The second main section presents a brief reflection on the development of teacher professional identity in relation to the positioning of "teachers" and "critical psychologists". The article concludes with a reflection on the practice of teaching and cultivating a teacher identity.

1. What is critical thinking?

There have been different theoretical models concerning the form and content of critical thinking. While it remains difficult to reach consensus, it is generally presumed that critical thinking will comprise core elements of cognitive skills such as the ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise arguments as well as to engage in both inductive

and deductive forms of reasoning (Van den Berg 2000). On the other hand, it has been argued that there is a tendency to overemphasise a cognitive skills approach to critical thinking.² Therefore, a cultural dimension has been put forward of what is meant by “critical thinking”. For instance, Van den Berg (2000) observed that the cognitive approaches have to a large extent been constructed within a mono-cultural context whereby larger social, political and economic contexts are not considered to be of much importance in how students engage critical thought. This critique highlights other important issues concerning the practice of reflexivity on the part of the student. This article adopts the definition and understanding of critical thinking as proposed by Teays (1996: 18):

the use of analytical skills, observation, reflection, and careful reasoning to perceive problems, examine assumptions, values and evidence [...] use moral reasoning, evaluate decisions, plans, problems and reflect on your thinking process, the relative merits of decision-making strategies, and the role of any prejudice or bias in the thinking process.

The role and influence on cultural contexts of learning becomes significant in the preceding conceptualisation, and the role of cultural values, and how these values may be implicit in our readings, observations and experience of social phenomena is emphasised.

2. Theoretical framework

Students’ work is always peripheral to some community of practice, and it is through that peripheral participation that students come to learn the practices of that community (Lave & Wenger 1991: 104).

The theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this study draws heavily on the critical educational studies of Paulo Freire as well as the discursive approach of Michel Foucault. In utilising both these approaches the authors acknowledge several key issues concerning critical thinking and the process of learning: emphasis on meaning construction, dialectic interaction between knowledge

2 Cf Beyer 1988, Freeley 1993, Halpern 1989 & Chaffee 1992 for an illustration of these models.

and power, and active promotion of critical thinking skills. Chetty (2000) uses a similar approach to investigate the reconstruction of South African literature curriculum. Following Chetty, it is argued that the nature of critical educational studies facilitates broader agendas of emancipatory social change within an educational context. The reason for this is that “traditional” subject positions of teacher and student as well as static models of knowledge and power are challenged, revisited and reconstituted to accommodate more egalitarian and dialectic positions and meanings that are, in turn, conducive to education transformation.

3. Freire’s critical education and Foucault’s discursive approach

Freire’s (1971) emphasis on “subjective” knowledge aligns itself with a Critical Social Psychology agenda of challenging models of knowledge within mainstream Psychology that are considered to be “objective” in theory and practice. With his notion of critical consciousness Freire explores the possibility for emancipation through learning by reconstructing the role of the learner from passive to active positioning. This process of learning entails fostering a critical and reflective space, addressing an awareness of the dialectical relationship between knowledge and agency. Through this, the learner comes to better understand his/her social reality in relation to others and the possibilities for active engagement and interaction within particular institutional contexts, particularly within the classroom. In addition, the emphasis on “problem posing” as opposed to “problem solving” means that the student is engaged in a process characterised by active reflection, an aspect necessary to nurturing critical knowledge and thought.

Foucault’s (1989) contribution to the debate on critical pedagogy advocates an approach to teaching and learning that involves a subversion of traditional teaching practices. These include a process of contesting relations between the teacher and the student in favour of student initiative in the learning process. This practice therefore extends to students as practitioners engaging in a process

of displacement of dominant discourses that tend to marginalise certain groups in society as well as within the knowledge production process in general. This form of subversion takes cognisance of the fact that change in the system as a whole is almost impossible; instead, what it seeks to nurture is an “interrogation of the hegemony” (Chetty 2000: 15). For example, as one of its deviations from traditional forms of communication, a multidisciplinary approach to critiquing and exploring alternative prescribed texts as a means of subverting “established” knowledge texts was chosen. The overriding objective, therefore, was not to reject these texts *per se* but to create a space where learners could begin to think of the texts as part of broader socio-historical and cultural resources that contribute explicitly and by implication to our interpretations and experiences of our social, political and economic environment (including so-called “critical” texts). Freire’s and Foucault’s critical orientation was instrumental in how to conceptualise both the form and the content of the course.

4. Course orientation

As a starting point Critical Social Psychology seeks to interrogate the ideological and political functioning of much of mainstream psychological theorising and practice (Fox *et al* 2009, Hook 2004). It is within this frame of critique that Ratele (2003) further argues for a concentrated effort from South African psychology to revisit the role and function of traditional Social Psychology in addressing social ills within society as well as meta-analytic processes of knowledge production in general. This call echoes the Critical Social Psychology agenda in its critique of mainstream Social Psychology as part of the need to address political and ideological functions of mainstream psychological practice, both universally and locally (Painter *et al* 2006). In this regard, an emphasis on problematising so-called traditional knowledge in psychology forms part of this critique and practice.

The Critical Social Psychology course currently offered to third-year students in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand addresses some of the core principles and concerns highlighted by

Ratele (2003) and others concerning the social and political relevance of Social Psychology in contemporary South Africa. The course is an elective module attended by approximately thirty students. At this level of study, all psychology students at the institution would have successfully completed their second year of study focusing on the following compulsory core sub-disciplines: developmental, social, personality and cognitive psychology. The Critical Social Psychology elective in the third year was therefore well placed to present varied forms of critical engagement with the different domains. Such a focus would entail an emphasis on critical reflection on the consequences of knowledge production espoused by each of these domains.

The orientation of the course with regard to subject matter also made room for a critical pedagogical practice of nurturing independent and critical thinking skills. The course's emphasis on interrogating and actively engaging with social, political and moral subject matter (in particular within a post-apartheid South African context) allowed for critical space to engage with subject matter that would be classified as "sensitive" or "taboo" in terms of the potential to disturb commonly accepted ways of thinking and understanding of one's immediate social and political world. For example, topics related to sexuality, race, gender, poverty and other categories of oppression formed the basis of class discussions and could perhaps be perceived as "threatening" particularly when one considers that mainstream (South African) psychology has for the most part represented and engaged with these issues in a decontextualised and neutral manner (whether by distancing both the student and teacher from the social communities they study and/or from themselves).

As researchers rooted in a Critical Social Psychology orientation, we arguably steered the focus and subject matter of the course (notably in the selection of particular readings and positioning within specific theoretical frameworks) but also framed the general emphasis on learning to be an active social practice. The emphasis was thus on the social nature of knowledge production within the classroom as well as the processes of negotiation between student and teacher. The particular sensitivity and controversy implied in some of the subject matter in many ways also directed the form of presentation

of the course. Given the “small” number of students that were registered for the course, we were well placed to deviate from the standard “teacher-student” relation where the teacher “instructs” and the students are essentially passive recipients of such instruction. Instead, we opted for more “mixed” styles of interaction (both formal and informal), including class discussions, debate, and presentations on specific topics and readings. This style of teaching was in some respects informed by the adoption of particular assessment tools. The next section will discuss in more detail both the summary submissions and found object presentations that comprised part of the assessment on the course. At the start of the course, students are requested to submit written compositions on how they perceive and experience their personal and social identities. By the end of the course they are again requested to reflect on and submit a personal reflection on their identities. Some of these reflections have been included for analyses to further illustrate how students respond to the agenda of a critical pedagogy and the course more generally.

5. Assessment tools

5.1 Critical summary submissions

Assessment tools for the course consisted of weekly summary submissions on a specific topic; an essay assignment; presentation of “found objects” which students were expected to identify, presenting a “mini-analysis” on a specific subject (for instance, analysis of the representation of teenage pregnancy within society or the discipline) to the group, and a formal examination. The weekly summary submissions were related to a subject matter specific to a sub-discipline, for instance developmental, social, research, and health psychology (cf Appendix). The overriding objective of these submissions was twofold: as a scaffolding exercise providing space for incremental learning, whereby students were nurtured to form an argument and reasoning required on assessments in general, and as an ideal avenue for better understanding of and insight into student thought processes and personal engagement with a specific subject matter. In keeping with the agenda of a liberating pedagogy espoused by Freire

(1979) the summaries sought to both evaluate the students' grasp of the course content and actively engage them in the knowledge construction process. These summaries were an attempt to gain insight into students' views regarding the subject matter and the level of critical engagement with the issues addressed in each week. For instance, the summary submission on the subsection of Critical Health Psychology:

What is the relationship between culture and mental health; is mental health universal; are there ways of dealing with mental health problems which differ from culture to culture; do some systems work better than others; what is the effect of regulating psychologists within bodies such as the HPCSA; what is the effect of regulating traditional healers under the supervision of doctors?

emphasised the role and importance of alternative perspectives to practising Health Psychology by reinscribing marginalised voices in the periphery, such as the role of traditional healers. Moreover, students were given the opportunity to reflect upon and critique some of their internalised values, having already completed at least two modules of mental health and psychopathology where such voices and perspectives are typically addressed as concluding caveats. More directly, questions were meant to engender self-reflexivity: where do I as a potential practitioner stand in relation to these issues?

5.2 The found object presentations

In addition to the written assessments, students were required to present oral presentations on a "found object" of their choice. This included identifying a subject for analysis that addressed core thematic and epistemological issues within a given domain of inquiry. For example, students may choose a particular topic such as "violence" by presenting a systematic deconstruction of issues raised. In order to do this effectively, students will need to have gained some familiarity with core epistemological issues and debates within the field of Critical Social Psychology and the social sciences in general. The found object presentation comprised the last class activity for the course and is usually conducted in the last week of the term. Prior to this, students are informed about the objectives of the

presentations and objects for analyses. In addition, lecturers consult with the students on the appropriateness of their object choices and their arguments for class discussion. Thus, the found object presentations and assessments are scaffolded from the beginning of the course until students present in the last week. Students have two options: individual presentation and analysis of the found object (in this instance, students find an object for analysis and consult with the lecturers individually) or a group presentation and analysis.

6. Methods

6.1 Research paradigm

A qualitative research paradigm was adopted to frame both the theoretical enquiry and the analyses of student evaluations. Qualitative research significantly moves away from prioritising the empirical world of the objective measurable exemplar in its recognition of the limits to rationality in social research. This can be viewed as an attempt towards understanding the subject in context. This ontological base informs the epistemological assumptions for doing research. Accordingly, Ezzy (2002: xii) states that qualitative research “involves working out how the things that people do make sense from their perspective”. This is unlike positivist research which seeks to place an “objective” distance between the researcher and the subject under investigation. In addition, both the discursive and the critical discourse analytic approaches were used in our rejection of a false dichotomy of the individual and the social. Key proponents of this approach are Potter & Wetherall (1987) who write from a social-psychological-philosophical point of view. According to Willig (2001: 121), discursive researchers raise the following key question: “[H]ow do participants use language to manage a stake in social interactions?” The critical discourse analytic approach exposes and understands the underlying ideological assumptions of certain dominant discourses. A prominent proponent of this approach is Van Dijk (1980, 1992 & 1998) whose influences include, among others, the works of Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard. The issue of power and its exercise in furthering the interests of elites at the expense of the domination of the powerless are crucial in this

instance. Willig (2001: 121) states that critical discourse analysts ask “What characterizes the discursive world that people inhabit and what are their implications for possible ways-of-being?” The current study is located firmly within the postmodern tradition of critical discourse analysis. The course outlined at the outset introduced the students to this epistemology, focusing on issues of marginalisation by means of the hegemonic discourses of gender, race, class and poverty. Alvesson (2002) states that categories are useful not only for naming and understanding but also as ways of imposing power and control which fixate our views. For example, the course sought to demonstrate the implications of having a category called “woman”, “black man”, “lesbian”, “rich” or “poor man”.

6.2 Participants

The entire third-year class (thirty students) registered for the Critical Social Psychology course and the two course lecturers constituted the sample for this study.

6.3 Procedure

Open-ended questionnaires (cf Appendix) were handed out in the lecture at the end of the semester. The questionnaires were anonymous and students were informed of their right to not complete the questionnaires if they felt uncomfortable with the process. They were also informed that the purpose of the evaluations was to assist the lecturers in improving the course structure and content, and that non-participation would not be detrimental to their academic performance in general. Completed questionnaires were to be submitted at a “neutral” location at the end of the week (in a marked box at a specified venue). All thirty questionnaires were returned.

6.4 Data analysis

The data analyses were informed by Freire’s and Foucault’s critical interrogation of the dominant discourses of teaching and learning as well as student-teacher relations. In this regard a thematic content

analysis of student evaluations was utilised in relation to a critical discursive analysis of the course assessments.

7. Results and discussion

The results from the student evaluations are discussed in terms of two overriding issues: student response to the agendas of critical pedagogical practice (which was discussed as both positive and negative responses) as well as student evaluations of the written summary submissions.

7.1 Students and critical pedagogy

7.1.1 Positive reflections

Student responses to the course in general may be divided into both positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences of the course included positive reception towards learning subject matter not traditionally considered to be part of the undergraduate psychology curriculum. This included the style of engagement with many of these issues, primarily in class discussions and debates. One student observed:

I can't really say that I grasped a lot of the concepts, but it was always useful to be present in class when we could discuss the readings or issues because it allowed me to give my interpretation on something and get feedback on that [...] but even beyond that, it's almost as if the [course] reader was part of the discussions, you know. Like, there is a reading in the reader and it doesn't just remain there, but we can take that reading and debate it in the lecture. This is not something we do normally ...

Another student noted:

Many of these things that we talk about, like HIV, we have heard so much about them, not just in other courses but also everywhere [...] but it was nice to address these things in a different way. I didn't realize that we could talk about HIV in terms of politics and resistance to dominant models in a discipline like Psychology. We can do this in Sociology, maybe, but not in Psychology. And it was nice to think about things like that sometimes ...

These quotations reflect some of the tensions that a critical pedagogy seeks to address in relation to knowledge functioning

within the social sciences. This tension is characterised by an acknowledgement that gaps may exist within entrenched models of knowledge. These gaps must not only be acknowledged but also critically interrogated if an effective pedagogical culture of critical thinking is to be cultivated.

In addition, the practice of scaffolding learning objectives by means of particular exercises proved to be a welcome practice. A general feeling was that the weekly summaries provided a space for engagement with the subject material in a personal manner and for the benefit of facilitating greater understanding:

It allowed me to air my views and enhanced my understanding of the course work.

The summaries were the most useful aspect. If I was lost for the week I knew I could always engage with the issues raised to the best of my ability in my submission and get feedback the following week from the lecturer. So I was behind at times, but never lost.

If you didn't know what the big deal was in a particular reading or even in the class discussions, you could always rely on summaries to tie things together and because we got feedback for each week, it made following the discussions okay.

The found object presentations were also considered to be useful for deconstructing the essay topic:

... because I knew that I had to present in class, I was devoted to doing proper research and that eventually translated into how I went about researching my topic as well. So it was almost like killing two birds with one stone.

The found objects were nerve-wracking. But because you could write your essay topic based on the feedback you got, you wanted to do it. And it allowed you to see how everyone else was thinking about the issue you want to discuss. So you weren't so alone.

These responses to both the assessment tools and the course in general were insightful in exploring how students set up a relationship to different assessment tools in the course of their learning. Other teaching practitioners in the field of Critical Social Psychology have noted a similar positive encounter between student and tools of learning in their course (cf hooks 1994, Prillettensky & Nelson 2002). In our experience, a noteworthy positive learning practice that was central to

the course, and that many of the students nurtured at varying levels of competence, was the practice of critical reflexivity.

7.1.2 Negative reflections

The general positive feeling about the nature of the course was also discussed in terms of negative experiences in the learning process. While all the students agreed that the course was sufficiently challenging for them and did meet their expectations, there was also a general sentiment that the challenge not only seemed overwhelming but also often led to a general sense of confusion in grappling with the broader epistemological aspects. Some feedback pointed to the fact that the course presentation was significantly different from practices, arguing that a bridge between second- and third-year subject content be developed so that such orientation is not novel when encountered at third-year level:

... to me, it would be better if we were prepared along the way for this level of engagement with readings and just generally in terms of the subject itself. At first and second year level, we are told to give back what we have learned and to be able to apply theoretical principles but not to think beyond what these theories do, or whether we can even think of alternatives. So a kind of preparation would be ideal [...] cos, it at times felt like we were thrown in the deep end and we had to manage that.

Another student noted:

I really enjoyed the course and the different way of interacting in lectures. But I have to say that all of this was incredibly new for me and it was difficult at times. No one prepared me for this level of interaction.

Students also pointed out the issue of depth of engagement as another negative factor. Given the supposed “density” of the readings, students reported feeling overwhelmed at times at the prospect of getting through the prescribed reading material for each session. As one student noted:

... if you did not grasp one concept that day, you were lost by the next day, as it progressed too fast.

The readings were very useful and we discussed these in the lecture so it never really felt like I was completely lost. But you were lost anyway if you did not manage to get through the readings for the

lecture. So you had to do it. But it was impossible at times. Firstly, we were not used to the nature of the arguments in the readings, so you couldn't just read once and for all and be satisfied. You had to really read. And that was time-consuming, especially since you had other courses as well.

I wish I could say I got through all the readings but I can't lie. It wasn't like other courses where you could skip some readings and manage to scrape through. It was too much.

Some readings were easy to understand if you had prior knowledge in other subjects like Sociology and Philosophy. But others were new, so it was difficult at times. And trying to fit all these each week was not always easy.

These observations point to a very useful practice of scaffolding different learning objectives in such a way that it addresses a learner's different levels of competence and skill. The problem of students being able to sustain particular learning practices as well as comprehension of some subject material points to the caution by Bliss *et al* (1996) that instructors must heed the problems implicit in scaffolding different knowledge objectives. They distinguish between scaffolding "everyday" knowledge from specialist knowledge, arguing that teachers often fail to take into account the ambiguity present in the teaching-learning context. This ambiguity involves awareness that mastering specialised knowledge is only possible through a step-by-step practice of learning. This practice, in turn, must be negotiated by both the student and the teacher in order to avoid any sense of "confusion" and feeling of uncertainty on the part of the student.

8. General reflection

While students to a large extent commented on the nature of the structure and content of the course, an equally interesting reflection on the subject matter of Critical Social Psychology in relation to how this epistemology impacted on individual identities and social interactions was evident. These are categorised as four key themes: challenging of "normalised" identities; "institutional" culture; psychology, and "contested" identities.

8.1 Challenging 'normalized' identities

An interesting feedback from the personal reflections concerned the issue of students' self-positioning. This process was especially evident in racial positioning. As part of the discussions, students were challenged to focus on the stereotypes and "naturalised" categories of identity which they immediately experienced as well as more general myths of identity in society. They were also encouraged to deconstruct those constructs in the formation of the stereotypes and category constructs. This proved at times to be a difficult exercise but also potentially useful for later discussions on the role of power and knowledge in sustaining ideological constructs of groups:

The best (and worst) part for me was being in the hot seat and having everything that I had considered to be the essence of me completely thrown out the window. Suddenly the things that I thought constructed me as black did not seem to hold much foundation, even though they were important.

We were asked to do a reading about coloured identities, and the author was arguing that this identity must be looked in terms of other constructs of difference and not as concrete identity. This reading really challenged me. As someone who has always defined and been defined as 'coloured' it was really hard to get my head around it. And I started thinking about all these issues of difference and whether or not that's important or we are just making a big deal about nothing. I still am confused, but it really got me thinking.

I remember in the very first lecture, the lecturer made us take a questionnaire on sexuality, but it was tricky because the questions were framed in such a way that they not only assumed our heterosexuality, but also posed as if this sexuality was a problem. Most of us just burst out laughing at how we were thrown off by this. Couldn't believe being straight could be seen as a problem. And then we discussed our feelings about it. And suddenly all the readings on identity as constructed made sense.

8.2 Challenging 'institutional' culture

A major source of conflict (both within the class and in the personal reflections submitted at the end of the course) concerned the value and significance of institutional spaces of social interaction and the symbolic meanings for group identity. In the class discussions students had been both very vocal and divided concerning the issue of personal freedom and institutional practice. For instance, in one of

the class discussions students were asked to debate the cultural and religious practice of wearing a headscarf at tertiary institutions (this topic had arisen from one of the group's found object presentation) and the issue of multiculturalism. While the class discussions generally focused on the issue of individual/group rights in relation to institutional culture, the personal reflections conveyed a general sense of unease and personal conflict related to the broader implications of interrogating the "neutrality" of particular institutions such as the tertiary institution as well as cultural practices. One student noted:

The best thing so far was the discussions we had in the class, because we got a chance to really engage with other and not just with the lecturer. But some of the discussions were also a bit impossible to reach consensus on because I don't think we were really prepared to listen to each other on some issues [...] especially those relating to religion and culture. It's like there are some things you cannot criticize or even question [...] and for me, that is so for a reason. The basis of our society as democratic is that there should be some things that remain objective and which we must not challenge. So if the religion is oppressive then obviously we must intervene but the problem is how can we decide that? So even that must remain neutral somehow, I think ...

Another student noted:

... the example that we discussed about the Muslim head-wear and how it was banned in France [...] I think shows that we must not bring cultural or religious issues into some institutions that are supposed to be democratic for everyone. Just like Muslims want their religion respected they must also respect some institutions, because these institutions are not political.

A similar observation was made, but in relation to the educational institution:

In the beginning of the course we were asked to think about the role of mainstream education in society. At first I thought this question was obvious because we all know what this is. But now that we have gone through the course I have to wonder if there is more. I think education is supposed to be objective and progressive and it is the one thing in society that you can say actually equalizes all of us. Of course, there are issues with people not being able to afford it. But otherwise, I think even though it is supposed to serve this function, sometimes there are political issues in what we are taught and what the nature of our degree will be.

8.3 Interrogating the self and the discipline

While the overall responses to the course seemed to convey a general feeling of enthusiasm and interest in the subject matter of Critical Social Psychology, this was also compounded by a sense of confusion and insecurity regarding the significance and role of this field of inquiry for the individual self. Some students indicated a feeling of vigour and curiosity about exploring the field further but were at a loss as to what value such an endeavour would have for them. Yet others indicated that Critical Social Psychology as a discipline was implicitly limited in the sense that there were no viable career options beyond tertiary education:

I like the subject very much. In fact this was my favourite subject in all of my varisty career. But I have to also wonder what I can do with it. Now I am in third year and I thinking about postgraduate and also working. And I am not too sure what this has to offer me.

I would very much like to continue in this area. I think it has so much to offer. I mean, I don't think I will ever look at what we do as psychologists the same. But sometimes I think 'okay, so what? What difference does it make to the discipline? And who am I if I am one of a few with a different orientation?'

Another student presented a tongue-in-cheek challenge to the pedagogical project of Critical Social Psychology:

Firstly, just to mess with your mind [...] Mainstream Psychology – all we knew until your course – conceptualizes itself as a study of social reality and all that and a gradual progression towards the truth. So, evaluation, such as a psychology exam, tests the student's grasp of the material available and how well they grasp the truth of the matter. All well and good. But, what about Critical Psychology? Presumably, as with most of its research tenets, it sits roughly between the mainstream positivist method and the interpretive oh-so-politically correct and subjective method. So, what of assessment? I take it you see where I am going with this. Given a good grounding in the necessary material – Foucault and power, psychology's production of that which it purports to treat [...] – is assessment a matter of right and wrong answers in Critical Psyc? Will you, o almighty marker, deem your own interpretation superior (because it accurately captures the TRUTH) and yet deign to read our attempts at constructive critique with an open minded approach? Will you be forced (or choose) to collapse back into a mainstream psychology approach to assessment? Or will you hold fast to principles of Critical Psychology and assess rather the deconstruction of common sense

knowledge, power hierarchies, etc? And, with issues of power and job security in mind, is it you who makes the decision?

Students also demonstrated different levels of critical reflexivity on summary submissions. The questions were asked in relation of certain competencies within the framework proposed by Strohm-Kitchener (1983) which seeks to evaluate epistemic assumptions and the ability to reflect on the limits of knowing. For example, the following student's response to the issue of regulating traditional healers under the supervision of doctors evinces a core competency of synthesising knowledge:

This practice places western medicine hierarchically above traditional medicine. I don't think it would be correct to carry out that practice as it gives doctors power over something they don't fully understand and probably don't believe in. It also takes traditional healing out of its context into a western context where it loses its meaning.

Another student answered that there would be too much conflict and that it would thus be unlikely that they would be able to work together. Embedded in the former response is the principle that knowledge is provisional. The response also distinguishes reflective judgement from logical, verbal and moral reasoning. All the above reflections appear to be separate from how we construct ourselves as teaching professionals. As relatively young professionals new to the teaching enterprise, we were equally interested in understanding the processes of enculturation into teaching and research as academics. The next section reflects on our positioning as young academics tasked with the objective of practising an alternative form of critical pedagogy.

8.4 Cultivating professional teacher identity: encountering oneself as a teacher

Changes in professional identity of teachers [...] are possible only when social construction and individual sense-making become closely related to each other (Geijsel & Meijers 2005: 420)

Watson (2006) argues that professional identity as a concept derives its significance primarily in relation to professional knowledge and action. Core narrative practices enable teachers to actively construct "teacher" identities that are, in turn, mediated by our institutional

contexts of practice. Professional identity in this sense assumes a more dialectical and socially constructed aspect than may be traditionally defined, in which teacher identity is regarded as actively produced in interaction between the teacher and institutional practice and context. Our practices as teachers and processes of mediation of these practices ultimately foster professional identity. In this respect Jurasaitė-Harbisson (2005) points out that the construction and reconstruction of teacher professional identity not only occurs in multiple settings but may also involve a process of contestation and renegotiation of predefined roles.

The learning experience has often been addressed in a dichotomous manner with an exclusive focus on either students or teachers. Zidon (1996), however, points out that the most meaningful learning occurs when student interest and needs as well as teacher knowledge of the discipline studied are balanced. The teacher-student relationship is a shared process of discovery. Friedland & George (2006) state that the teacher practices “beginners mind” together with the student. They refer to Suzuki’s (1970) claim: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s there are few” (Friedland & George 2006: 1). Our experience as relatively new teachers is queried in relation to this conceptualisation of “beginners mind”. As relative newcomers to the field and practice of teaching we experienced not only feelings of insecurity and apprehension about our teaching practice, but also our role as “professional experts” in relation to the students. This anxiety was further compounded by a tacit awareness that we were required to work within pre-established discursive spaces and assume specific identities relevant to our community of practice. This feeling of insecurity about our practice as teachers, and paradoxically the conferment of an “expert” status on us as teachers, motivated a continuous reflection on our pedagogical practice, curriculum, and relations with our students throughout the duration of the course. How does one become a more reflective teacher? How do we understand reflective thinking? Moreover, as young black male and female teachers we had to grapple with the complex negotiations of race and gender which we also explicitly used to inform our practice. For example, our own positioning as “black”

academics at times influenced the class discussions on specific topics. Such discussions were often fraught with irony: challenging students to interrogate categories of identity such as “race” and sexuality while consciously adopting self-positioning within these categories in some instances.

For Cruickshank (1985) reflective thinking is concerned more with micro-aspects of teaching, learning and subject matter, while Liston & Zeichner (1987) emphasise macro-aspects in relation to the sociopolitical and moral principles of teaching. We adopt both understandings of the term in our self-exploration of our reflexivity. Our invitation to students to continually reflect on the historical, social and moral (in our emphasis on the “good”) aspects of social practice necessarily also entailed a continuous personal reflection of our beliefs and assumptions, in particular within a context of dialogical interaction with our students. Thus, we emphasised not only the social aspect of knowledge construction between ourselves and our students but also personal meaning-making processes that form part of the development of professional identity. This process thus involved a radical shift from an initial focus and emphasis on product-oriented form of presentation of the course (task completion of the different assessments) to a more process-oriented one, emphasising the actual process of what and how the students were learning. As mentioned earlier, however, individual attributes and personal and social background will inevitably influence what each individual (both student and teacher) derives from such a process.

9. Conclusion

The introduction of a critical orientation to undergraduate students is important for cultivating a critical consciousness that not only understands the power of knowledge producers but also interrogates the dominant discourses that marginalise certain groupings within society. The article also outlined how a scaffolding approach to teaching new content and form was presented by means of different assessment criteria for the course. The positive experiences encountered as teaching practioners was equally characterised by

negative experiences that were related to our own ambiguous and at times difficult conceptualisation of scaffolding exercises of learning objectives. These experiences need to be critically reflected upon for future conceptualisation of critical contexts of learning. According to Geijsel & Meijers (2005), professional identity learning must entail a kind of “double dialogue” in which to reflect on the meanings of the boundary experience that pertains to our community of practice. This process, however, must also entail an exploration of the personal sense of these boundary experiences. Teaching practitioners are continually engaged in a process of personal negotiation and sense-making of their respective communities of practice. These personal negotiations are always played out in relation to broader discursive and pedagogical practices that form part of such practice, and inevitably have implications for how teachers understand and experience themselves as teaching and learning “experts”.

This article briefly explored new teachers’ experience of teaching a new course, without any real sense of their role and identities as teaching experts, while having to negotiate this personal dilemma with broader social and moral constructs of education as a social practice. A general attempt was made at understanding these processes of the discursive constructs of professional identity within broader pedagogical challenges of promoting creative and critical thinking skills. No lasting answers are provided to some of the dilemmas raised; in fact, there are no lasting answers or indefinite understandings of professional identity and/or the best methods to facilitate critical thinking. Learning is always contextual and specific to unique and varied personal and social influences. However, it must be emphasised that any worthwhile development of the curriculum, enhancement of teaching and learning must always entail an ongoing and continuous process of critical reflection on the part of practitioners. This is both a moral and pedagogical necessity if teachers are to realise a vocation truly “rooted in hopefulness” (hooks 2003: xiv).

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Appendix A – Weekly summary tasks

Critical Health Psychology

Using the framework of critical social psychology (social constructivism), answer the following questions:

- What is the relationship between culture and mental health?
- Is mental illness universal?
- Are there ways of dealing with mental health problems which differ from culture to culture?
- Do some systems work better than others?
- If we had a different social order, could we reduce the rates of mental illness?
- Is modern living bad for our mental health?
- What is the effect of regulating psychologists (HPCSA)?
- What is the effect of regulating traditional healers under the supervision of doctors?

Critical Developmental Psychology

Discuss how the experience of black people is typically excluded or ignored, only to appear as associated with “social problems” such as early and single motherhood.

Provide a critical developmental psychological commentary on the newspaper clip from the *Sunday Times* (23 July 2006) with a social constructivism interrogation.

Epistemology

Visit the international critical psychology 2005 conference website on the following link: <<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/critpsy/programme.htm>>. Select the tab ‘program’ for an alphabetical list of abstracts. Choose any one of the abstracts and write a brief summary on why you find this of particular interest. In what ways does the abstract fit in with the agendas of a critical psychology? Your discussion should demonstrate a critical awareness of the following: psychological, governmental and subjective levels of analyses.

Critical Therapeutic Interventions

- How was the psychiatric profession born and from where did it get its power?
- Discuss how behaviourism fares under the social constructivism gaze?

Critical Organisation Psychology

Psychology consultants help corporate executives adapt to a changing economy so that “managers can help their employees find fulfillment in their work without jeopardising the bottom line” (Fox 1996: 37). Provide a critique of this statement of what psychologists do, and advocate for a more radical role for organisational psychologists.

Appendix B – Course evaluation questions

1. Please comment on whether the level of the course content was pitched correctly – was it sufficiently challenging for you?
2. How did the link between the 1-page summaries and the course content enhance your understanding?
3. Did the 1-page summaries enhance your understanding of the essay topic?
4. Do you feel presentations of 'found objects' are helpful for your understanding?
5. Do you feel that the link between the suggested readings and the essay was effective for your learning?
6. Why did you register/choose this particular course?
7. Did the course meet your expectations?
8. What is your critique of the course?
9. What did you enjoy most about the course?