

SUMMER INQUIRY WORKSHOPS

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL THINKING MORTON D. RICH

Imagine twelve professors representing seven disciplines meeting for two days to discuss applications of autobiographical writing in their disciplines. Then imagine them trying to recite Sanskrit noun endings as the first challenge of the workshop and you can picture an intense and energy-filled atmosphere.

Why Sanskrit? As workshop leader, I wanted my colleagues to have an experience similar to the kinds our students have on the first day of class in a new discipline. They can feel lost, confused, anxious and embarrassed, as well as curious, energetic and inquisitive. They bring all of themselves—their personal histories, preconceptions, needs, desires, biases, prejudices, and most intensely, their prior classroom experiences.

When I was recently introduced to Sanskrit by a totally patient instructor who repeated each element of a lesson as many times as each student needed to learn it (and did not go on until everyone had learned the point at hand) I still found myself fearing my turn, just as I had in many classrooms in the past. Prior embarrassing experiences had left their mark. In the past, I knew that I was expected to answer correctly or face classmates' derision and teachers' corrections, not always delivered with patience and kindness. With those memories churning inside, how does anyone ever learn anything in a classroom, especially thinking strategies? In each new learning situation, we need to consciously experience our lives as learners so we can separate the functional from the dysfunctional.

In the Inquiry Workshop, I did not take the time to fully teach the Sanskrit noun endings, but I praised all for whatever they offered. There were no failures, only first attempts to learn. My objective was to notice what we have in common with our students, and in this case, that included embarrassment, annoyance, impatience, curiosity, a need to get it right, and, for several people, a need to not sound foolish. And so it is in many classrooms.

As part of the workshop, we wrote about our self-expectations and noticed the high standards we professors set for ourselves. We asked each other whether we expected students to arrive at the same answers we have developed through our individual modes of inquiry in our disciplines. Most of us professed to be open-minded, encouraging diversity within the parameters of a subject. One professor found the exercise especially useful, noting that it will help us all to be more sensitive to and understanding of our students. Several said they planned to add autobiographical assignments to their courses; one professor found that she had acquired a base of support for her devotion to the use of autobiography.

Some interesting questions were raised concerning how to deal with a student's demons and get on with the work.

GLOBAL EDUCATION AND CRITICAL THINKING GEORGE BERNSTEIN

After preliminary introductions, participants experimented with performances based on the work of Augusto Boal, Brazilian playwright, director and educator, whose method involves individuals in improvised theatrical situations rooted in real life situations. Boal's approach demands personal, active and physical involvement, as it draws the participants and observers into an intense world that highlights issues and invites intervention. Performance, just as critical thinking, stresses group learning and group evaluation of its own learning.

In one scenario, the problem of Russian identity, which has been an inevitable consequence of the calamitous dissolution of the Soviet Union, was considered by the group in an improvised scene of the toppling of Lenin's statue. The centrality of the matter of language in the Soviet Union was also considered, touching on the complicated history of the expanded presence of Russian language through the power of the Soviet State.

In the second of our twin themes of Soviet and Islamic societies, participants considered the stereotypes present in the West when we attempt to confront the realities of Islam, both inside and beyond its fundamentalist manifestations. A recent documentary on fundamentalist Islam was viewed which portrayed religious protagonists discussing, organizing and educating for the faith. The hunger for spirituality as well as the enticement of Western ways were prevalent themes in all the countries filmed.

What, some wondered, could critical thinking do with these dilemmas? Could we argue in favor of universalizing the cultural values of Western societies? Or should our first premise be that each culture possesses an integrity of its own that should continue to deal with issues in its own way? Again and again the issues of particularism and universalism inescapably emerged. When the nature of cultures is discussed, it leads us to ask questions about the nature of reason and the ways in which it can exercise itself.

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That is, if autobiographical expression is encouraged, what can be done if one individual's need for self-expression, especially if it is unconscious, threatens to overwhelm the class? Another question concerned how to help future teachers recognize the impact of their personal histories on their willingness and ability to acquire skills and strategies necessary for effective teaching. Valuable questions were directed at how to recognize and accept autobiographical elements in students' thinking. We left with a sense of excitement about new ways of thinking about ourselves and our students.

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