Can “critical thinking” serve among ways of promoting cultural diversity in education? I teach the use of philosophy in understanding the processes and goals of education, and it seems to me that philosophers of education have a kind of proprietary claim to “critical thinking” as a mode of education. Western philosophers trace the roots of their discipline to that historic pedagogic pair Socrates-Plato. The pair provided critical thinking its legendary sendoff when Plato recorded his famous mentor’s defense at his trial (in The Apology). In response to the charge that he has corrupted the youth of ancient Athens by leading them to question the established beliefs of their society, Socrates replied that, “The unexamined (or uncriticized) life is not worth living.” If Socrates-Plato were right about this, then we as educators need to do more than teach the young established skills and information valued in our society. We also need to teach them to challenge established beliefs and knowledge, to look for ways in which they might be improved on, to consider views from other cultures; (i.e., to think critically).

But the Socratic-Platonic influence on education has not been totally benign. Socrates-Plato wanted to make people critical, but they also wanted to make them more logical and more rational. And Plato, at least, thought that some people are better equipped to think logically and rationally than others, and that the former group ought to be running society. Plato wanted to use education to create a meritocracy, in which the people with the ability to profit most from education became the leaders of society. Western societies ever since have shown a tendency to use education meritocratically.

I became a Socratic teacher despite my reservations about meritocracy, because I treasured those occasions when my own education had become dialogical, when teachers gave me opportunities to state and explore my own beliefs, and to listen critically to the beliefs of others, whether held by teachers, fellow student, or texts. At the same time I had doubts about Plato’s belief that dialectic leads humanity closer and closer to a divine, rational and beautiful truth, which if known becomes the source of human goodness. Part of what I now regard as postmodern currents in our culture involves a repudiation of that Platonic program.

In our present era, educators have become concerned to recognize and honor diversity. But some of the cultures we want to recognize and honor have not inherited the Socratic-Platonic tradition of critical thinking, and have not used education to create a meritocracy of reason and intellect. Thus “critical thinking” can function as a slogan that restricts educational recognition of cultural diversity.

I want to explore with you the question of how critical thinking contributes to education for diversity. I think that educators will need to revise their understanding of critical thinking for it to make a positive contribution to honoring cultural diversity in schools. Changes in our culture that can be summarized under the label “postmodern” seem to me to call for such a revision in the way educators view critical thinking.

While many recent authors write about postmodernity, use of the term can create considerable confusion. I use the term to refer to trends that call into question those ways of thinking that are typically modern, for example, the typically modern understanding of critical thinking. That typically modern view still contains echoes of the Socratic-Platonic tradition. These echoes sound most clearly in the modern theory of
science. Modern science, generally speaking, regards critical thinking as a mode of intellectual progress, in which truth becomes the product of continuous critique. In this regard, Karl Popper sums up the modern theory of knowledge brilliantly in his contention that science proceeds by systematic attempts to disconfirm its theories (Popper, 1962). Popper’s theory tends to privilege the tradition of scientific inquiry as a source of knowledge superior to any other, just as Plato privileged the dialectic method of looking for inconsistencies among conventional beliefs as the royal road to truth.

In both cases, critical thinking means finding the flaws in the other person’s arguments. This places a great burden on those outside the Western cultural tradition. In effect, they have to learn to play the game of inquiry by traditional, Western cultural rules and standards—including controlled experimental inquiry and critical logical analysis—or abandon the field of knowledge to those who do play the game by these rules and standards.

The emergence of greater respect for cultural differences calls into question the fairness of education that takes traditional Western rules and standards to be the only valid ones. In this regard, recognition of cultural diversity becomes a major impetus for challenging traditional assumptions of modern thought. The diversity spoken here begins to speak in postmodern ways.

In an article reproduced in The New York Times in March 1992, Vaclav Havel, the poet-playwright, and then President of Czechoslovakia, proclaimed a new set of needs for the societies of the world at “the end of the modern era” (Havel, 1992). He called for a change of attitudes, away from the arrogance of typically modern beliefs in a humanism that dominates the natural universe, a scientific method that generates objective knowledge and assures unlimited progress, and advancing technology that can overcome the problems that are the byproduct of earlier technologies. Havel would replace these with each individual’s unique experience of the world, his or her sense of justice and ability to see things from the perspective of others, and “faith in the importance of particular measures,” as opposed to the large-scale plans characteristic of modernity.

The revolutionary view of the history of scientific progress set forth by Thomas Kuhn (1970) in his book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, revealed a crack in the modern consensus. Kuhn pictures science as not striving for some final, Platonic truth, but for a humbler goal: to keep inquiry alive by finding a language by which people can share their dispassionate observations of the natural universe. While special communities such as the various sciences may devise their own preferred means of testing knowledge, that process does not render their truth superior to the truth of others in other communities. Respect for cultural diversity can be called “postmodern” that calls into question the universality of modern theories of knowledge and science.

In its traditional guise “critical thinking” is closely tied to modern theories of knowledge. Bernard Williams (1990), a leading British exponent of analytic philosophy, which has dominated the late modern era in American philosophy, defends that philosophy because it exemplifies certain virtues of what he calls “civilized thought,” virtues associated with critical thinking:

it gives reasons and sets out arguments in a way that can be explicitly followed and considered...it makes questions clear and sorts out what is muddled. It is an activity pursued under constraints...among others, those of rational consistency...its spirit overlaps with the sciences...the ideal is the old Socratic ideal that mere rhetoric and power of words will not prevail (Williams, 1990).

Nick Burbules (1990), in a paper on the varieties of dialogue that Plato pictures Socrates engaging in, divided them into two basic patterns. The first, he describes as “more skeptical...using the question and answer format to pose critical questions, counter-arguments, exceptions, objections,
and generally emphasizing points of disagreement over those of agreement.” Burbules contrasts this with an approach that approximates what some have called the “believing game,” i.e., “assuming the initial plausibility of a point of view simply in the fact that someone holds it, using questions and answers to elicit information [and judgment?] rather than to promote doubt...” (Burbules, 1990, p. 130).

If one pursued the Platonic program or that of modern science, the first of these approaches clearly outranks the second. But as people in our culture become increasingly skeptical of the modern project of advancing toward some final truth, the two uses of dialogue that Burbules identifies no longer seem so antithetical. People begin to mix believing with their doubting in most conversational contexts.

In responding to Burbules paper, Alven Nieman (1990) sees a need “to separate out the ironic, erotic Socrates from the dialecticism he seeks to become in later (Platonic) dialogues....” Nieman describes this ironic, erotic Socrates, not as engaged in a Platonic quest for certainly, but as one who, in Milan Kundera’s (1988) words, “denies us out certainty by unmasking the world as an ambiguity” (cited in Nieman, 1990). Nieman (1990) urges teachers and learners to “embrace irony” in order to achieve “the kind of playfulness with language and being...that Socrates brought to his fellow Athenians” (pp.133-134).

The weakening of modern theories of knowledge and science suggests that teachers can encourage from students accounts of belief beyond those that conform to traditional standards of inquiry and logic. Critical thinking in a postmodern era calls for ways of evaluating the communications of others that transform traditional and modern standards of knowledge and truth.

Socrates rejected rhetoric because it was monologic not dialogic. David Hansen (1988), in an article in Educational Theory notes that, in the dialogue with Theaetetus, Socrates stresses his maieutic or midwife’s role. He claims to bring forth “new” ideas (in the same sense in which birthing brings forth a “new” life) not from the minds of those he questions, nor from his own mind, which he describes as largely devoid of knowledge, but from the dialogue that occurs between people (Hansen, 1988). Socrates, on this part of Plato’s account, believed that individual minds cannot possess knowledge, but should seek to give birth to it in dialogue. Dialogue, however, may find a more important educational role if viewed from a postmodern perspective than from either a classical or modern one.

Peter Elbow provides a suggestion for a postmodern approach to the evaluation of the communications of others (Elbow, 1986). Elbow argues that, in their approach to critical thinking, educators should balance their emphasis on methodological doubting with what he calls methodological belief. Elbow quotes George Miller’s maxim: “In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume it is true and try to imagine what it might be true of” (p. 254). Elbow describes what he calls “the believing game,” in which people learn from others by granting their claims “a provisional plausibility simply based on the fact that those claims are sincerely held.” This postmodern approach to critical thinking has direct relevance to the classroom. Elbow gives this advice for the conduct of class discussions: When a reader is telling what she sees in a text or what happened to her in reading...the other readers must not just shut up, they must actively try as hard as they can to believe her—to see and experience the text as she does. (In this way we may see) something faint...which she is particularly good at seeing (p. 259).

In a paper to the national meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, Garrison and Kimball (1993) point out what they call “hidden barriers” to dialogue. They note John Stuart Mill’s argument that the conflict of ideas and opinions furthers the cause of democratic society, but add that, “In a conflict of ideas and opinions the powerful will
likely win out" (Garrison & Kimball, 1993, p. 179). On this point, Garrison and Kimball agree with Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), who describes her own classroom as not a safe place for dialogue. Ellsworth writes, “dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historical moment power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust” (p. 316). Ellsworth’s account of her own teaching experience accords with the postmodern temper in its emphasis on the political context of knowledge.

I see two principal challenges to those of us who wish to continue to be Socratic teachers in a time marked by increasing signs of postmodernity. We should face the political realities of power in our society that keeps dialogue from functioning educationally. And, having granted that claims to knowledge occur in specific political, historical, social and psychological contexts, we then face the skeptical question of whether Socratic teaching makes sense without the Platonic assumptions that it brings people closer to essential truth.

My own teaching makes me often painfully aware of the first of these challenges. I know that many of my students who don’t join the conversation of the class believe that their position prevents them from contributing as equals. Some think that Socratic conversation involves prerequisites that they lack. Surely the many years of schooling they have had before they reach my class have contributed to this view.

I have felt most successful as a Socratic teacher when I can sustain an enormous curiosity in what students have to say, in the stories they tell about themselves and their responses to the world about them. Ultimately, that curiosity rests on a like curiosity about how I can engage in conversation with them, in what new things I will learn about myself as well as about them. This allows for the recognition of diversity.

I note that writers who identify themselves as working with postmodern sensibilities often stress that modern thinkers invented the idea of an essential self, but that from a postmodern perspective, people recreate themselves continuously in response to the changing circumstances of their lives. They do this, in part, by the stories they tell about themselves in conversations with others. Perhaps by use of the term “maieutic,” Socrates meant to suggest that we create in conversation not only an identity for ourselves but a common world in which that identity resides. If, then, people want to change the relationships of power within society, those changes must ultimately be made in the dialogues among people.

At the same time, I suspect I have addressed my second challenge. Postmodern inquiry cannot have a final goal, because each person’s story changes as their conversations with other continue. I have been assigning my classes Plato’s Protagoras since I began graduate teaching. I did to in response to a similar assignment in a course I took in graduate school which in turn was based on an assignment the teacher, Lee Troutner, had had as a graduate student at Stanford. Despite this long chronology of continuity, Plato’s Protagoras has changed over the years as different classes with different members, have taken up the assignment.

I find the Protagoras a highly evocative text, in the sense that after all these years I remain curious how someone else will respond to it. My students and I engage in critical thinking, because one person’s response triggers additional responses in some of her classmates. I consider a “good” class session one in which the conversation continues to build as, one after another, students create responses triggered by other in the group. To my mind, these reflect Elbow’s methodological believing.

Where students learn to regard the teacher as the arbiter of all truth in a classroom, you can’t have genuinely multicultural education. Even if a teacher assigns texts by authors of many different cultural backgrounds, so long as the teacher remains the sole expert on the interpretation
of those texts she insures the monocultural nature of the education offered.

The traditional structure of classrooms in American schools militates against multicultural education, by teaching the young that each classroom has one expert voice, a single arbiter to whom students must appeal all questions of truth. Each teacher represents a single culture, no matter how diverse her background and interests. A classroom becomes multicultural when it includes the truth presented by others besides the single teacher. Teachers achieve this by regarding each student as a member of a common public world with her, one in which, as Thomas Green writes, she entertains the speech of each as a candidate for her own speech (Green, 1988).

Every person, from the age when speech begins, can speak the truth. The hearer or reader of statements, however, can’t rule out the possibilities that elements of illusion and deception are mixed with even the most disinterested descriptions of experience. To make sense of the communications of others, the hearer makes a judgment of where on the continuum of description, illusion and deception a particular communication lies. Human communication typically combines appeals to community standards of credibility with attempts to conceal hidden motives. People can speak truth even when they intend to deceive. But critical judgment continues to rest with their auditors. Teachers need to continue to exercise such critical judgments. But critical judgment stifles communication unless combined with methodological believing, i.e., with the attempt to discern the truth of the statements of others. As American culture enters a postmodern age, I’m intrigued with the question of what can be done differently in education. I do not take the emergence of the postmodern era as necessarily salutary. I do think that it offers some new possibilities: that people can learn to talk to each other without trying to get the upper hand through appeal to superior knowledge; and that teachers can speak to students on a basis of equality, not based on sameness but on the recognition that their differences limit the ability of each to prescribe for the other.

In a postmodern age, teachers of critical thinking can still make use of Socratic method, but with the addition of Elbow’s methodological believing. Instead of proceeding by breaking down the beliefs of others, postmodern socratic method would proceed by each participant finding in the communications of others that kernel of truth that relates to one’s own experience, thereby building up an expanding web of knowledge within a community of discourse. Teachers could encourage students to make the truth of others their own by adding to it what in their own experience resonates with the ideas taken from others.

The postmodern temper allows for attention to a much wider range of truths, if educators can overcome the modern preoccupation with driving out falsehoods. Students would no longer need to second-guess their own communications by combing them for evidence of possible falsehoods. Instead, they would gain the support of teachers and fellow students in probing their communications for hidden truths that methodological believing can bring to awareness. A postmodern approach to critical thinking in classrooms rests on the commitment of teachers to the intrinsic value of conversations; (i.e., their commitment to value conversations among students without subjecting them to evaluations on the basis of pre-established criteria of truth or productiveness). Commitment to the intrinsic value of conversations includes recognition of equality among people that contrasts with the modern attempts to exclude certain others from our lives, whether by racial, religious, or sexual discrimination, or by the intellectual ranking of people. It means that conversation will no longer allow the marginalization of people on the basis of their ignorance of particular intellectual traditions, or their inability to observe the canons of inquiry.

As a way to begin, I suggest that teach-
ers initiate class discussions by asking a student to present a reaction statement to course assignments, and asking other members of the class to respond using Elbow’s methodological believing. A small step, but as Havel’s faith in particular measures suggests, the postmodern era invites just such small steps to school reform.

Footnotes

1. By “modern,” I refer to an era in western cultural history, generally from the 17th century to some point late in the 20th century.

References


Author’s Notes

Address correspondence to: Clinton Collins, University of Kentucky, College of Education, Educational Policy Studies & Evaluation, Lexington, KY 40506-0001; email: cxcoll01@pop.uky.edu.