

Review Article on Critical Management Education

Review of L. Perriton and M. Reynolds, *Critical Management Education: From Pedagogy of Possibility to Pedagogy of Refusal?* *Management Learning*, Vol. 35(1), 2004

Perriton and Reynolds build their article on a debate that circled around a challenge by Elizabeth Ellsworth to the field of 'radical' education when she published an article in 1989 that suggested that critical educationalists, while espousing Freirean emancipatory ideals, were failing to 'confront the authoritarianism inherent within most teacher-student relationships' (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p. 62); in other words, that they failed to practice what they preached. Perriton and Reynolds use this debate as a starting point for surveying the current state of critical management education and asking whether the same criticism could equally apply to us. They argue that the contradictions inherent in the concept of a critical management education are such that the field might benefit from a repositioning, away from the concept of emancipation to a more delicate and paradoxical standpoint of 'refusal' – a refusal to be co-opted into either unquestioning collusion or radical challenge.

'Critical' management education is an approach to management pedagogy that, to a large extent, owes its inspiration from the philosophical contributions made by the so-called Frankfurt School (see How, 2003 for a good introduction into critical theory generally) and was applied to the field of management initially by Alvesson and Wilmot (1992 and 1996, cited in Perriton and Reynolds, 2004). Perriton and Reynolds chronicle its development over the last 10 years and attempt to set out an underlying 'identifiable set of pedagogical beliefs' which, they suggest, although rarely articulated would find fairly widespread agreement amongst practitioners:

- A commitment to questioning the assumptions and taken-for-granted embodied in both theory and professional practice...
- An insistence with foregrounding the processes of power and ideology that are subsumed within the social fabric of institutional structures...and the ways in which inequalities in power intersect with such factors as race, class, age or gender,
- A perspective that is social rather than individual...
- An underlying, but fundamental aim that is emancipatory – the realisation of a more just society based on fairness, democracy, and 'empowerment' of identifying and contesting sources of inequity and the suppression of voices of minorities (summarized from Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p. 65).

I found reading this immensely exciting because I realised how very strongly I identify with these underlying ideas and how much they form my own 'taken-for-granted' not only in my approach to teaching but also to my management practice more generally.

However, Perriton and Reynolds go on to explore two problems: firstly, the question raised by the Ellsworth debate about the extent to which the practice of critical educators mirrors these beliefs and, secondly, the extent to which these critical and emancipatory aims are shared by students.

Ellsworth (as summarized by Perriton and Reynolds) wrote about her experiences of attempting to deliver a course in racism using a critical perspective and deliberately trying to de-centre her own role as teacher. These attempts 'came unstuck' because the setting produced constraints such that she 'failed to come to grips with issues of trust, risk, and the operations of fear and desire around such issues of identity and politics in the classroom' (Ellsworth cited in Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p66). The anxieties generated by the de-centring of the traditional hierarchical role of the teacher were not able to be addressed within the limitations of the setting. Therefore she questions whether such aspirations would ever be realistic. [1]

In response, Perriton and Reynolds expose a deep ambivalence about the very nature and significance of management practice on the part of its teachers, which may not be shared or appreciated by its students. They comment that 'manager academics don't seem to like managers very much'. [2]

This ambivalence about management, and, in particular, about the more oppressive aspects of its practice, may not be shared by students who are aspiring to become managers themselves. In an study of the attitudes of MBA students towards a critical pedagogy, Currie and Knights comment that 'Southeast Asian students [in particular]... felt that a critical approach undermined a perspective and model of managerial behaviour they feel it necessary to learn in order to obtain employment with a western global company' (Currie and Knights, 2003 p. 38). Students who are aspiring to management jobs in part because of the status and power they confer do not necessarily share the emancipatory assumptions of their critically orientated teachers!

These points are well made. However, my particular specialism, within the broader area of management education, is equality and diversity. The agenda of managing diversity has to be inherently subversive as it is solely concerned with challenging discriminatory practices that exclude people because of the factors such as race, sex, sexual orientation. As Foldy points out, 'genuine attempts to address diversity issues will pose inherent challenges to existing power relations... it is not possible to address diversity without addressing power' (Foldy, 2002 p.108). Furthermore, these efforts must have a societal impact – managing diversity within organisations has to be part of an agenda of wider social change.

Therefore, regardless of the difficulties that Perriton and Reynolds describe, a critical approach *has*, it seem to me, to be inherent in the teaching of the dynamics of diversity in organisations. Perriton and Reynolds suggest that Memmi, who wrote about the colonisation of North Africa, offers a useful construct in the idea of the 'colonizer that refuses', the 'individuals who worked within the colonial state apparatus *despite* being politically uncomfortable with the idea and reality of colonial rule' (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p. 72). We, they suggest, might usefully think of ourselves as the 'educators who refuse'.

Perriton and Reynolds suggest an interesting parallel: 'women are expected to live with and desire the parties who have traditionally and institutionally denied them legitimacy' (citing Berlant, 1988) 'and there are some obvious parallels with CM educators who live with, and desire the capitalist society in which they seek to bring about change' (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p. 74).

In reading this article another parallel occurred to me – the position of the voluntary sector manager. Most voluntary organisations are formed out of a strongly felt desire for societal change, usually on behalf of, or for the benefit of a marginalised group. Much of their effort is directed at the state, either in terms of better legislation or better services. The dilemmas that such organisations find themselves in when the government of the day seeks to work with them (or co-opt them) as willing partners in a shared endeavour, as is the case with the current labour administration, are heartfelt and well documented (see Rosenmann, 2000 for example). It takes great skill and a fairly heightened awareness to walk the tightrope between challenge and collusion. Elsewhere, (Schwabenland, 2001) I have used the metaphor of the 'holy fool' to describe this relationship – traditionally the role of the fool (the only one who could 'speak truth to power') was to keep the king honest. The implication is that these skills should form a part of the curriculum on managing diversity.

Perriton and Reynolds do not really address the question of *how* the adoption of the role of the educator who refuses might be realised in practice, but perhaps voluntary sector management, at its best, might provide a useful source of ideas. However, the questions of how to develop a culture of trust and respect that is strong enough to 'contain' the anxieties that arise from any challenge to existing power relationships, is a more difficult problem. Those approaches that do have some success in this area, such as action learning or self-directed learning, in which the power relationship between the 'teacher' and the group are redefined, require a longer time scale and facilitators with highly developed skills in group work.

Perriton and Reynolds are primarily concerned with management education. But it seems to me that their ideas could also usefully be extended to look at the tensions that are inherent in the management of education. As the ethos and practice of managerialism are increasingly being applied to education, management educators could be seen as playing a difficult balancing act on a four dimensional tightrope!

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Notes

[1] Noumair (2004) writes about attempts to explore diversity issues at a university through the model of the group relations conference, as pioneered by the Tavistock Institute, over a five year period. While the conferences served as a means of diagnosing some of the inherent contradictions in the university's own practices, and did create a space in which they could be explored, the extent to which they were able to do this developed over a considerable time scale, which does reinforce Ellesworth's question as to how realistic this is within the limitations of a particular course or module.

[2] A 'tertiary reference! Perriton and Reynolds are citing Burgoyne as cited by McAuley and Sims, 1995 (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004 p71).

References

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