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DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL CURIOSITY IN PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this paper, I present what I call critical curiosity, which I employ in a study exploring the benefits of incorporating popular culture into professional education to foster and deepen learning about core concepts or theories and contentious or "difficult" issues related to developing practice. After outlining perspectives on curiosity and connecting it to adult education and learning, I consider how popular culture can be brought into the professional education classroom as a resource to foster the quality of critical curiosity.

Keywords: popular culture, curiosity, professional education, critical pedagogy, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I outline critical curiosity, a concept that I am employing in an ongoing research project on how popular culture can be inserted into professional education curriculum to support teaching and learning about core theories and concepts or controversial, sensitive issues. For the past decade, I have investigated how cultural consumption in the course of everyday, leisure life—watching television, seeing films, reading novels, listening to music, and many other activities—functions pedagogically for consumers. Now, I am asking how I, as an adult educator working in post-secondary professional education, can bring the insights of past research into my pedagogical practice with students, specifically to engage them in deeper reading, discussion, and application of key scholarly ideas.

My current study is premised on the argument that a critically oriented curiosity is important in fostering the learning necessary for the development of respectful, ethical professionals who question and come to understand the social conditions that inform their own experiences and circumstances and those of their clients, patients or students. In my study and in this paper, I draw on the writing of critical and feminist scholars Freire (1998; Horton & Freire, 1990) and Enloe (2004). The term critical curiosity actually appears in Freire's (1998) writing, although its use by Freire is fleeting and might not capture all that I include in my conceptualization. For Freire, it is another way of referring to his notion of "'epistemological curiosity,' without which it is not possible to obtain a complete grasp of the object of our knowledge" (p. 32). Enloe's "feminist curiosity" complements Freire's idea. Extending Enloe's term and her thinking about the importance of considering women's circumstances, I begin with the premise that *all* people and circumstances are "worth thinking about, paying close attention to, because in this way we will be able to throw into sharp relief the blatant and subtle political workings" (p. 4) that produce social, material, and cultural marginalization.

I see one important difference between Freire's and Enloe's ideas. Freire's aim is to help marginalized groups ground their learning in their own experiences. Beginning with an identification of their circumstances and bringing a concerted focusing of attention and a questioning mind to bear, marginalized learners can illuminate the connections between their immediate circumstances and broad socio-political systems. Enloe's priority is not necessarily to work with marginalized groups; rather, she aims to help all people look outward beyond their immediate conditions, whether of oppression or privilege, and, by becoming curious, to trace the connections between their conditions and potentially far-away people and places in this time of globalization. More recent than Freire's writing, Enloe's work responds to contemporary globalization in linking people and places not just on a national but on a transnational scale. In developing my sense of critical curiosity, I take up Enloe's scope of concern and interpret her explanation as an acknowledgement of the multidimensionality of curiosity and, by extension, learning. Like feminist curiosity, critical curiosity requires thought, but

paying close attention requires more than thought and is more than an intellectual process. I return to this point in my discussion of shifting from reflection to curiosity and from curiosity to critical curiosity.

In the following sections, I begin by reviewing writing about curiosity and its connection to adult learning, before building on and bringing together writing about the topics of critical pedagogy, reflection, and curiosity. I close by considering implications of critical curiosity for adult educators and students who are engaged in professional education, as well as the potential for popular culture to support a pedagogy of critical curiosity.

THE CURIOUS TOPIC OF CURIOSITY

The topic of curiosity has garnered attention for centuries for scholars in disciplines such as philosophy, psychology or, increasingly, neuroscience, and among those who might be characterized as an informed public. Like all words, curiosity has a contested meaning and purpose, depending in part on scholars' backgrounds and influences, and the sociocultural trends that surround scholarly work. Over decades of study, neither a singular theory nor a singular understanding of curiosity has resulted (Livio, 2017). From the view that curiosity signals a "lack of self-restraint, encroachment on other people's privacy, prying into matters that did not concern one" (Berlyne, 1978, p. 99) and even an immoral pursuit of power (Schmitt & Lahroodi, 2008), curiosity has increasingly "been lauded as a virtue" (Berlyne, 1978, p. 99), a quality necessary for innovation, creativity, and caring. Even today, though, curiosity can be demeaned as "*just* curiosity," viewed as "too assertive, too aggressive, or too inappropriate to speak in public in front of others … [or] problematic, something to be ashamed of" (Lewis, 2012, p. 27, emphasis in original).

Aside from being valued in multiple and changing ways, curiosity can be understood as a human drive (Berlyne, 1978), albeit also in various ways. In Berlyne's terminology, it can be characterized as "perceptual" or "epistemic." While the former is apparent when a new or strange phenomenon draws any animal's attention or when individuals identify "'knowledge gaps'" (Loewenstein cited in Pluck & Johnson, 2012, p. 26), the latter is distinctively human and gives rise to "quests for knowledge or information that could be stored in structures of symbolic responses" (Berlyne, 1978, p. 144). Based in another discipline, astrophysics, Livio (2017) includes Berlyne's ideas in his book on curiosity, noting the categories of "specific" and "diversive" curiosity, characterized respectively by attention to "a particular piece of information" (p. 4) and "the restless desire to explore and to the seeking of novel stimulation to avoid boredom" (p. 4). In the same vein, Schmitt and Lahroodi (2008) distinguish between curiosity as interest in a topic or as a general disposition or personality trait. Other categories noted by Livio include "empathic" curiosity, "the standpoint we adopt when we try to understand the desires, emotional experiences, and thoughts" (p. 2) of others, and what is referred to even colloquially as "morbid" curiosity (see also Schmitt & Lahroodi, 2008). Beyond those different forms of curiosity, Livio (2017) notes that there are differences in degree of curiosity from one person to another and, even within one individual, between different types of curiosity.

Some, including Livio (2017), make connections to a feeling of uncertainty, which "up to a point … enhances curiosity. After that point, however, the uncertainty becomes so overwhelming that it can produce discomfort, or even fear" (p. 31). According to that view, curiosity is in tension with anxiety, so that "a classic approach-avoidance conflict" (Silvia & Kashdan, 2009, p. 785) is produced. According to Silvia and Kashdan, getting the balance right in this tension matters: On the one hand, the unfamiliar might be filled with danger that is best avoided. On the other hand, "curiosity and exploration are essential to learn how to adapt to changing situational demands and capitalize on growth opportunities. Without curiosity, stagnation is inevitable" (p. 785). Finally, one phenomenon or idea can summon great curiosity in one person and none at all in another (Livio, 2017; Silvia & Kashdan, 2009). Ultimately, although study and theorization of curiosity have produced insights without consensus, it is clear that there are connections between curiosity and learning and, by extension, education.

CURIOSITY AND ADULT EDUCATION

Psychologists remain interested in the link between curiosity and learning, and some of them have become influential in the scholarly field of education for both youth and adults. Early references to curiosity are evident in the writing of pivotal figures such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey, who noted the importance of curiosity in children's exploratory, experiential learning. Although their ideas and their overall social constructivist view of knowledge and learning can be and are taken up by adult education scholars, "their theories exist primarily to explain development of cognitive processes in the early years of life … [and are] of less use in understanding adult curiosity" (Pluck & Johnson, 2012, p. 24). Pluck and Johnson argue for study of "the ways in which curiosity is stimulated [among adults] in order to enhance the probability of meaningful learning occurring" (p. 25).

In the field of adult education itself, references to curiosity go back almost a century; however, many of them remain theoretically or philosophically, rather than empirically, grounded. Scholars who are considered foundational thinkers in the field of adult education have considered curiosity to be a driver of adults' learning and its satisfaction a benefit of learning (Tough cited in Knowles, 1973; Bruner cited in Jarvis, 2004). For Freire, learning and curiosity are inextricably linked in the human condition of "uncompleteness" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 11). According to him, "We are not complete. We have to become inserted in a permanent process of searching. Without this we would die in life. It means that keeping curiosity is absolutely indispensable for us to continue to be or to become" (p. 11). Indeed, "the stifling or inhibition of curiosity" (Freire, 1998, p. 79) in both the student and the educator, which characterizes Freire's notion of banking education, constitutes the "epitome of negation in the context of education" (p. 79) and is fundamentally unethical. From a Freirean perspective, the quality of curiosity is vital to educators and education for two reasons: It keeps learners interested in the material and the educational purpose, and it "stimulate[s] questions and critical reflection about those questions" (p. 80). I return to that second reason in the next section.

Because little research into curiosity has been conducted in the field of adult education, a study by Rossing and Long (1981), now several decades old, remains notable. They asked U.S. college students to rate scenarios, first, on how surprising—seen as a prompt for curiosity—and how relevant the scenarios were and, second, on how strongly they wanted to learn more about them. Only ratings for relevance were correlated with ratings for desire to learn. Questioning the importance of curiosity in adulthood, they posit that, if "adults may be more likely than children to reject or explain away information that contradicts their beliefs" (p. 25), then it might make sense to think of adults as generally less curious learners than youngsters. In contrast to children's curiosity-driven or intrinsically motivated learning, adults' learning, according to Rossing and Long, is more extrinsically motivated by, for example, promises of improved job and earning prospects or the need to address community or societal problems; therefore, they caution, "the extent to which findings regarding children's curiosity can be extended to adults is uncertain" (p. 26). Although diminished curiosity might leave adults stuck in their current views or "habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58), it also helps them develop "a stable personality" (Rossing & Long, 1981, p. 27).

Of course, Rossing and Long's work represents just one perspective on the presence of curiosity in adulthood and its function in adult learning. Since they conducted their study, other lines of thought have been pursued, albeit often by psychologists, and the view that adults can remain curious and that curiosity can motivate or foster learning has not been abandoned. Still, understanding how curiosity functions and when it will be manifest is difficult. Silvia and Kashdan (2009) remind their readers that there is no predicting what will interest people; the uniqueness of any object or phenomenon might or might not stimulate the curiosity of any individual. Moreover, they note, interesting things are not necessarily important things. As adult education scholars working in the area of public pedagogy and popular culture point out, the very matter or experience that spurs curiosity and learning might divert attention away from matters that call for greater, more critical attention (Tisdell, 2008).

In addition to that connection between curiosity and criticality, curiosity also links to thinking about the holistic nature of adult learning, strongly informed by feminist work. A holistic view approaches education and learning as processes involving emotion, embodiment, and intuition (Dirkx, 2001, 2008;

Flannery & Hayes, 2001; Lawrence, 2012; Tisdell, 1998), as well as intellect. That multidimensionality is not a new insight and is apparent in statements that adult learning can be spurred as much by "*intellectual* curiosity concerning the universe itself" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 145, emphasis added) as by the force of "a strong *emotional* curiosity" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 97, emphasis added). "The exercise of curiosity convokes the imagination, the emotions, and the capacity to conjecture," according to Freire (1998, p. 82); in other words, curiosity can be seen as an enabler of creative potential, which itself can involve affect and sensation, as well as reason. Even in the vernacular, especially when it comes to "epistemic" or "empathic" curiosity, people are described as being captivated or overcome or possibly even obsessed by an object of curiosity (Livio, 2017; Schmitt & Lahroodi, 2008). As public pedagogy scholars caution, though, it is precisely the multidimensionality of learning and curiosity, the tension between what adults enjoy and what they are concerned about, that can distract them from critical analysis of cultural representations and real-life problems (Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Tisdell, 2008).

A Curious Reflection

Interestingly, despite the apparent relevance of curiosity to adult learning, the historical references to curiosity in adult education writing, and now-common recognition of the multidimensionality of adult learning, adult education scholars seem most likely to focus on the process of reflection and the quality of reflexiveness. The influential framework of transformative learning, popularized by Mezirow (2003) and taken up and extended by other scholars, including Freire (1998; Horton & Freire, 1990), rests on the reflective process. Brookfield (2009) notes the "frequent calls for practitioners to be critically reflective" (p. 293).

In that statement, Brookfield recognizes that, just as there are variations of curiosity, so too are there variations of reflection. Like curiosity, reflection can be critically or instrumentally directed. Just as I am not interested in any sort of curiosity, I am not interested in any sort of reflection. The criticality of Freire's and Enloe's work, the link between personal experience and circumstance to wider structures and systems and interrogation of the politics underneath them, all remain key for me. Brookfield (2009) goes on to clarify that adults might reflect on all sorts of things in all sorts of ways, without engaging in critical reflection, which involves "researching the assumptions that undergird our thoughts and actions within relationships, at work, in community involvements, in avocational pursuits and as citizens" (p. 295). So, it seems, there are similarities between reflection and curiosity.

A significant difference between them is that reflection remains a cognitive, rational pursuit. Reflection undoubtedly remains a cornerstone of critical learning; however, the multidimensionality of adult learning seems cut short by an exclusive emphasis on the intellectual, analytical process of reflection. Moreover, while critical curiosity entails reflection, even critical reflection does not require curiosity. The aim of reflection is to make sense of experience; on its own, it is backward-looking. In contrast, curiosity spurs learners forward not only to new experiences but also to new possibilities for connecting experiences to one another and to ideas.

Returning to Enloe's (2004) writing about curiosity, I note that it might be tempting to stop at her statement about the importance of "thinking about" other people; however, her reminder about the importance of "paying close attention" suggests that being curious is not exclusively intellectual. Paying close attention involves more than thinking about it. Enloe describes herself as "an enthusiast" (Enloe, 2004, p. 94) and recognizes the power of "feelings, ideas, and actions" (p. 273) in changing not just individuals' lives and understandings but also society and geopolitics. Most explicitly, in her explanation of taking things seriously, she writes, "'Seriously' implies listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span, being ready to be surprised" (p. 4). These are examples of the intellectual, affective, and sensory dimensions to her conceptualization feminist curiosity, just as there are to the fullest conceptualization of adult learning.

Curiosity is not a quality to be romanticized as foundational to critical adult learning, though. As Rossing and Long (1981) might argue, a good deal of adults' learning is motivated more by instrumental needs and the promise of immediate pay-offs than by curiosity. Furthermore, not everything that awakens curiosity—whether intellectual or affective or both—is important (Silvia &

Kashdan, 2009). Still, I am staking my study—and my teaching—on the premise that fostering curiosity among adult learners is possible and that doing so can help them move beyond instrumental priorities and pursue deeper questions. By developing a critical curiosity that turns people's attention to social relations and inequities, curiosity becomes more than distracted fun or superficial nosiness, what to Freire (1998) is "ingenuous, 'unarmed' curiosity" (p. 37) or "naïve curiosity" (Lewis, 2012, p. 29).

THE CURIOUS CULTURAL CONSUMER

Today, the breadth of popular culture (plat)forms and genres increases the likelihood that there will be something that excites consumers' curiosity. In a widespread culture of celebrity and fandom, cultural consumers are ever-more tied into popular culture not just as a source of entertainment but also as a site of community affiliation, of sense- and self-making, of learning.

In my own research, I have investigated the pedagogical function of popular culture in adults' leisure lives. In one study, medical and nursing students who were fans of the television series *Grey's Anatomy* or *Scrubs* described how they juxtaposed messages and representations in the shows with what they were learning in their formal education programs. Although they recognized the shows' tendencies toward absurdity or melodrama, participants found both shows' portrayals of surgical specialties as high-status and high-stress realistic (Jubas, 2015; Jubas & Knutson, 2012, 2013). While some looked to those fictions as previews of future opportunities to master delicate techniques and solve patients' problems, others rejected the idea of working very long hours in a hyper-competitive cultural milieu. Overall, participants recognized the importance of the teaching and learning techniques apparent in the shows, from textbook learning and tests to rounds and practical experience. Female participants especially found *Grey's Anatomy*'s portrayal of nurses as closer to surgeons' handmaids rather than skilled professionals in their own right both troubling and, to some extent, an ongoing and pervasive stereotype.

In a follow-up study, I explored how *Grey's Anatomy* crosses borders to inform understandings of what is considered a distinctly national policy platform (Jubas, Johnston, & Chiang, 2014, 2017a, 2017b). Although Canadians regularly trumpet the value of this country's socialized medical insurance scheme and its centrality to Canadian identity, at the time of that study there were almost no popular culture representations of doctors, nurses or healthcare services made by and for an Anglo-Canadian audience. Given the popularity of *Grey's Anatomy* and other U.S.-produced medical shows in Canada and popular culture's general pedagogical function, I was interested in what Canadian fans learned as they watched the show, which is set in Seattle and makes no obvious attempt to speak about or to people in Canada. For participants, the show became a reminder of their good fortune to live in a country where they could receive medical care, in contrast to many of the patient characters in the show who could not afford private insurance. Several noted that the show helped them understand the battle over so-called Obamacare that was unfolding at the time of the study.

As those studies suggest, cultural consumers might be curious about and learn interesting things on their own from the characters and texts that they encounter but, as scholars cited above note, not all curiosity and not all learning is critical or even positive. In their writing about the evocation of empathy among cultural consumers, Jarvis and Burr (2011) caution that likeable characters are not always ethical or admirable, a fact that people can overlook as they are swept away by captivating characters, stories, and productions. Ultimately, Jarvis and Burr remind their readers, a strong emotional reaction to a cultural text can serve to maintain rather than challenge problematic cultural portrayals and real-life relations. For that reason, Tisdell (2008) advises that popular culture be brought into the classroom, a space where instructors and students can work together purposefully to develop not only critical curiosity about the issues under study but also critical media literacy abilities, which are needed throughout everyday life.

A CURIOUS INSTRUCTOR: DEVELOPING AND RESEARCHING A CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION

In a recent interview on the CBC radio show *q*, actor Alan Alda, who has become interested in human communication, stated, “Ignorance is a wonderful thing. … Well, if it’s coupled with curiosity. Ignorance without curiosity, not so good” (Alda, 2019). In my study, I am exploring how a deep form of curiosity can be fostered to help students identify and respond to points of ignorance about practices of everyday life and work.

Although my inquiry is consistent with Freire’s final aim, mine is not a Freirian inquiry. Most notably, I am not conducting a project with or for oppressed groups and, although media literacy is crucial in today’s old and new media-saturated world, my focus remains on fostering curiosity about concepts, theories, and issues introduced in undergraduate and graduate professional education courses. Learning how to receive popular culture texts more critically is a positive learning outcome for students, but it is a by-product rather than an aim of my study and my pedagogy.

In my current study and in my own classroom, I approach popular culture texts—television show episodes, films, radio segments, graphic novels, and other examples from popular culture media—as aids to help students move from dismissing concepts and theories as scholarly abstractions to seeing and hearing them as useful in understanding their own lives. By engaging with and juxtaposing texts of scholarship and of fiction directly, discussing and working with them as a class, students collectively witness how theories and concepts are present in and help them make sense of real-life, including in their professions and workplaces. In courses that I teach, journal articles about intersectionality are discussed in relation to the film *Moonlight*; articles about transformative learning are discussed in relation to the film *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*; articles about habitus, social and cultural capitals, gender and race relations are discussed in relation to an episode of the television show *Scrubs*. In linking those cultural texts to scholarly texts and their own experiences, students are invited to see how concepts, theories, and issues under study are (re)present(ed) in practice. As they become more deeply curious about what they are encountering, their initially naïve curiosity (Lewis, 2012) directed at being competent workers and entertained cultural consumers approaches Freire’s epistemological curiosity, Enloe’s feminist curiosity, and my own critical curiosity.

Critically oriented adult education, including in the formal classroom, is dedicated to illuminating points of ignorance about social conditions and helping people build knowledge and understanding about those points. In its fullest form, critical learning is grounded in a mix of intellect, affect, experience, and sensation. Curiosity might not always be what brings adults to the classroom—as scholars cited above note, it might be to satisfy a work-related need, to pursue a credential or to support career advancement; however, as Alda’s comment suggests, when ignorance is recognized by learners themselves and paired with a curiosity that is encouraged by instructors, learners’ initial emphasis on instrumental information and performance measures can open them to the possibility of learning that is deeper and broader.

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