STEPHEN D. BROOKFIELD

BECOMING A
CRITICALLY
REFLECTIVE
TEACHER

SECOND EDITION

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

Second Edition

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Preface

The first edition of this book was written in the last part of the last century. It was initially published in 1995 before the explosion of the Internet and before social media changed how people communicate at the most basic level. But although the first edition could be considered technologically antediluvian, its basic project of exploring how we might build the critically reflective habit into our teaching seems to have endured. Today I get just as many people coming up to me and talking about the influence this book has had on them as I did in the immediate years after its publication. The four lenses of critical reflection—students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory, and personal experience—are just as relevant now as they were twenty-five years ago, and the desire to make sure our practice is based on accurate assumptions regarding how to help students learn is central for any teacher who wants to do good work.

In the decades since the first edition appeared I've been asked to do multiple presentations, speeches, and workshops on the topic of critical reflection in all kinds of contexts. So I've got a lot more experience of what this process looks like in practice and the kinds of problems and questions people have about it. I've come to a better understanding of its culturally and racially variable nature and the ways social media can be incorporated. I've had three more decades dealing with power and trying to judge what an ethical

and responsible use of power looks like. And I've come to understand that critical reflection is just as central to leadership as it is to teaching. Anyone who wants to lead well wants to be sure the assumptions they hold about what constitutes a justifiable exercise of authority are accurate and valid.

I've also had the chance to experiment with the process in my own work. When the first edition came out I'd used the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) described in chapter 6 only for a few years. Now I have a quarter of a century of experience with this instrument, and I've learned a lot about my own assumptions as a result. I've come to a deeper appreciation of the importance of modeling and the fact that communication—the how of leadership—is so crucial. I've realized that the use of autobiographical narrative is a powerful tool to draw people into learning and that small-group work—properly structured—is consistently the most appreciated classroom activity. The CIQ has also shown me that students regard team teaching as the most effective pedagogic model. And, I'm more aware of the presence of racial dynamics and have completely revised the assumption that I was a good white person (Sullivan, 2014).

The core thesis of this second edition is the same as that of the first. Critically reflective teaching happens when we identify and scrutinize the assumptions that shape our practice. The way we become aware of these is by seeing our actions through four complementary lenses. The first of these lenses is the lens of *students' eyes,* most often represented by classroom research and classroom-assessment activities that give us reliable information on how students experience our classrooms. The second is *colleagues' perceptions*, most commonly present when we team teach but also available in support and reflection groups. Third is the lens of *theory*, comprising research, philosophy, and narrative descriptions of teaching in higher education. This literature can open up entirely new ways of thinking about familiar problems and dilemmas. And finally the lens of *personal experience* provides a rich vein of material for us to probe. Reflecting on good and bad experiences as

learners gives us a very different perspective on power dynamics and the responsible exercise of authority.

The theoretical tradition that informs this understanding of critical reflection is that of critical social theory. Critical theory seeks to understand how people come to accept blatantly unjust systems as a normal and natural state of affairs. It's particularly interested in the process of ideological manipulation: of getting people to internalize ways of thinking and acting that ensure their continued marginalization and disempowerment. Situating critical reflection in a critical theory tradition leads us to a focus on two kinds of assumptions: (1) assumptions about power dynamics and what constitutes a justifiable exercise or abuse of power and (2) assumptions that seem commonsense and serve us well but that actually work against our best interests (what are called *hegemonic assumptions*).

Although many of the ideas from the first edition have made their way into this version, I have completely rewritten the whole book from the opening sentence to the last. Some chapters have retained their old titles but all have been completely rewritten. Six new chapters—almost half the book—have been written specifically for this edition. Based on feedback from readers of the first edition I have described more deeply what constitute assumptions of power (chapter 2) and hegemony (chapter 3). The lens of colleagues' perceptions has had its analysis extended to include the process of team teaching (chapter 8). Today's social media landscape was entirely absent in the early 1990s so chapter 11 examines how to incorporate social media into critical reflection. The need to address race and racism has become glaringly obvious on twenty-first-century college campuses, and chapter 12 deals with how to create these conversations. And the way that critical reflection is endemic to effective leadership is considered in a new chapter 14.

Audience

This book is for all teachers who think about their practice. The primary audience is likely college and university teachers in two- and

four-year institutions, vocational and technical institutes, and proprietary schools. But practitioners in staff development and training in a wide range of organizations should also find it helpful. The ideas and practices in the book have been field-tested with everyone from the Occupy movement to the Marine Corps; the World Bank to mining schools; art, fashion, and theater institutes to oil corporations; hospitals to seminaries; and prisons to parent groups. I've written it for instructors across the disciplines; whether you teach biology or aeronautics, art history or engineering, theology or accounting, the analyses and practical examples are intended to be relevant for you.

I've tried to write this second edition using the accessible and personal style of the original. Far too many books on teaching are written in a bloodless, disembodied fashion. I want this book to connect viscerally as well as emotionally. So I write in the first person throughout, use lots of contractions, and try to include autobiographical experiences when these seem to fit. People used to a more distanced, third-person style will probably find this distracting, at least at first. But I've persisted with this style specifically because so many people who'd read the first edition said they liked its informal tone and personal voice.

Overview of the Contents

The book opens with a description of the critically reflective teaching process. I clarify its purpose and distinguish among three different kinds of assumptions that are typically uncovered: paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal. I introduce the four lenses of critically reflective practice and then explore in depth the specific project that makes reflection critical: uncovering assumptions about power and power dynamics and recognizing when hegemony is in place.

Unearthing assumptions of power is the focus of chapter 2. I start by discussing some commonplace assumptions about teaching and then look specifically at assumptions concerning

power dynamics. To illustrate power's complexity I provide two scenarios common in higher education classrooms: arranging the chairs into a circle for classroom discussion and trying to remove yourself from discussions to be a fly on the wall. Chapter 3 explains the concept of hegemony—the process of actively embracing ideas and actions that serve the dominant order and are harmful to you—and gives some examples of this in action. I look at seven common hegemonic assumptions: the assumption that teachers use their charismatic singularity to motivate students, the idea that good teachers always have things under control, the belief that resistance to learning can be removed, the need to achieve perfect evaluation scores from students, the faith that someone somewhere has the answer to your problems, and the certainty of feeling you can fix racism, sexism, and the other ills you see around you.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide the first in-depth look at the four complementary lenses of critical reflection. Chapter 4 summarizes the contribution each lens makes and chapter 5 justifies why using these lenses is so important. I argue that critical reflection helps us to take informed actions, develop a rationale for practice, survive the emotional roller coaster ride of teaching, prevent self-laceration, enliven our classrooms, keep us fully engaged in work, model the democratic impulse, and increase trust.

The next group of chapters elaborates each of the critically reflective lenses in turn. In chapter 6 I present some techniques for seeing ourselves through students' eyes such as the one-minute paper, the muddiest point, the learning audit, clickers, social media, the Critical Incident Questionnaire and the letter to successors. Chapter 7 examines how to benefit from colleagues' perceptions and offers suggestions for setting up collegial reflection groups. Directions are given for using start-up sentences, beginning with critical incidents, the Chalk Talk exercise, the Circular Response method, Bohmian Dialogue, and the Critical Conversation Protocol. The analysis of the collegial lens is extended to team teaching in chapter 8. Team teaching enables you to model critical

reflection for students and helps you manage the emotional aspects of your work.

The way that personal experience provides a lens on teaching is explored in chapter 9. I show how we can gain insight by examining personal experiences of learning, such as participation in graduate study, professional development workshops, academic conferences, and recreational learning. My story of learning how to swim as an adult is retained from the first edition because so many readers picked that out as a highlight. Chapter 10 considers the final lens of theory. I discuss how different kinds of literature (particularly narrative theorizing) shake us up, open new perspectives, help us recognize ourselves, and combat groupthink.

Chapters 11 and 12 are new to this edition of the book. Chapter 11 considers how social media can be incorporated into critical reflection, particularly back channels of communication. I discuss how social media allow for anonymous feedback and their contribution toward inclusivity. Chapter 12 examines the reasons why critical reflection on race and racism is so difficult and how narrative disclosure can be employed to set a tone for examining race. I focus particularly on what students tell us about how to set up and negotiate racial discussions.

Negotiating the risks of engaging in the critically reflective process is the subject of chapter 13. I look at how to deal with impostorship (feeling as if you're a fraud), cultural suicide (unwittingly threatening colleagues when you confront accepted assumptions), lost innocence (realizing that no one perfect response to difficult problems exists), and marginalization (finding yourself pushed to the fringes because you're challenging the system). The final chapter 14 is also a new chapter and turns to the ways in which critical reflection is applied to leadership. In particular I provide an analysis of how the most common institutional activity—meetings—can be turned into a critically reflective opportunity. The book ends with a comment on how to model critically reflective leadership.

Acknowledgments

A big thank-you to all the people who have come up to me in the years since this book first appeared to tell me how much it meant to them. I wish I'd been smart enough to keep a record of who you are. Your enthusiasm for the first edition and your endorsements of its worth convinced me to revisit the book and produce an entirely new edition. Writing is such a solitary process and without external reaction it's easy to believe that your words are just disappearing into the ether. But hearing from you at conferences or via e-mail that this book had some meaning for you was the soul fuel I needed to spend a year revising it.

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About the Author

The father of Molly and Colin and the husband of Kim, Stephen D. Brookfield has written, coauthored, and edited eighteen books on adult learning, teaching, discussion methods, critical theory, and critical thinking, six of which have won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education (in 1986, 1989, 1996, 2005, 2011, and 2012). He also won the 1986 Imogene Okes Award for Outstanding Research in Adult Education and the 2013 Phillip E. Frandson Award for Outstanding Literature in Continuing Education. His work has been translated into German, Finnish, Korean, Japanese, Polish, and Chinese. He has been awarded three honorary doctor of letters degrees from the University System of New Hampshire (1991), Concordia University (2003), and Muhlenberg College (2010) for his contributions to understanding adult learning and shaping adult education. In 2001 he received the Leadership Award from the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) for "extraordinary contributions to the general field of continuing education on a national and international level." He currently serves on the editorial boards of educational journals in Britain, Canada, Italy, and Australia, as well as in the United States. During 2002 he was a visiting professor at Harvard University. After a decade as professor of higher and adult education at Columbia University in New York, he has spent the last twenty-five years at the University of St. Thomas

in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he holds the title of the John Ireland Endowed Chair. In 2008 he won the university's Diversity in Teaching and Research Award and the John Ireland Teaching and Scholarship Award. In 2008 he was also awarded the Morris T. Keeton Award from the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. In 2009 he was inducted into the International Adult Education Hall of Fame. In his other life he leads a pop punk band— The 99ers—which has released five albums on Spinout Records (Nashville, Tennessee).

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

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What Is Critically Reflective Teaching?

Every good teacher wants to change the world for the better. At a minimum we want to leave students more curious, smarter, more knowledgeable, and more skillful than before we taught them. I would also want my best teaching to help students act toward each other, and to their environment, with compassion, understanding, and fairness. When teaching works as I want it to, it creates the conditions for learning to happen. Students increase their knowledge, deepen their understanding, build new skills, broaden their perspectives, and enhance their self-confidence. They see the world in new ways and are more likely to feel ready to shape some part of it in whatever direction they desire.

Teaching can also work in the opposite way by confirming students' belief that education is a pointless and boring waste of time in which nothing of interest, relevance, or value happens. Here teaching confirms people's adherence to the status quo by strengthening whatever mechanisms of social control are in place and deepening students' apathy and conformism. So for good or ill the world is never the same after teaching.

Of course this neatly bifurcated way of presenting teaching as inherently liberating or conforming is actually far more complex in reality. I may design an exercise that I believe engages students and promotes participation, but they may experience it as a manipulative exercise of power. For example, in my first-ever

course I taught in the United States I announced at the first class that students had control over deciding what should be the course curriculum. I assumed this announcement would produce an intoxicating and welcome sense of freedom, but I was told only that they'd paid a lot of money to learn from me, the expert. As unconfident novices in a new subject area they said I was setting them up for failure by not providing sufficient guidance for their learning.

One of the hardest lessons to learn as a teacher is that the sincerity of your actions has little or no correlation with students' perceptions of your effectiveness. The cultural, psychological, cognitive, and political complexities of learning mean that teaching is never innocent. By that I mean that you can never be sure of the effect you're having on students or the meanings people take from your words and actions. Things are always more complicated than they at first appear.

For example, in my own practice I place a strong emphasis on narrative disclosure. I like to provide examples from my life that illustrate points I'm making. I do this because students across the years have told me that this captures their attention and helps them understand a new concept. But there is another side to using personal examples and that's being seen as self-obsessed. Sometimes students' evaluations of a particular class have called me *arrogant*, a term that bothers me greatly because I hate self-importance so much. When I describe a situation or incident in my own experience that I think clarifies a complicated idea or shows how a new piece of information might be applied, I assume I'm being helpful. Yet some interpret this as an unhealthy fascination with the minutiae of my own life, as borderline self-indulgence. Investigating and clarifying these kinds of complexities is what critically reflective teaching is all about.

Critically Reflective Teaching

Our actions as teachers are based on assumptions we have about how best to help students learn. These assumptions come from a

number of sources: our own experiences as learners and the way we interpret these, advice from trusted sources (usually colleagues), what generally accepted research and theory say should be happening, and how we see students responding. Sometimes these assumptions are justified and accurate, sometimes they need reframing to fit particular situations, and sometimes they're just plain wrong.

Critical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions. We all work from a set of orienting, stock assumptions that we trust to guide us through new situations. Some of these are explicit and at the forefront of our consciousness. For example, I hold two strong explicit assumptions. The first is that whenever possible teachers should initially model for students whatever it is they wish those students to do. The second is that the best teaching happens in teams. That's because team teaching enables teachers to bring different knowledge and perspectives to bear on topics and to model intellectual inquiry by asking questions, seeking to understand differences, and disagreeing respectfully.

Other assumptions are much more implicit. Implicit assumptions soak into consciousness from the professional and cultural air around you. Consequently they're often harder to identify. For example, for many years I assumed that discussion was the best teaching method to use with adults. This implicit assumption came from three sources. First, my personal experience of schooling was characterized by lectures, dictation, and top-down approaches, something I found really boring. When I became a teacher I was determined not to replicate that approach and so moved instinctively to using discussion. Second, the theory I was reading in my professional preparation drew from English and American traditions that explored education for social justice and community development. This theory, particularly that of Freire (Freire and Bergman, 2000), emphasized the importance of dialogic processes, and this deepened the commitment to discussion that arose from my bad memories of school.

Third, pretty much every one of my colleagues at the adult education center where I worked advocated discussion as the most appropriate teaching method for working with adults. Over time the assumption that discussion-based approaches were inherently superior and the most "adult" just became part of who I was. It ceased to be something I thought consciously about and just embedded itself into my habitual practice. Planning a new course? Use discussion! Setting up a staff development effort? Start with small groups!

I still argue strongly for the relevance of this approach (Brookfield and Preskill, 2016). But since I started deliberately and regularly examining my assumptions I've realized that sometimes it doesn't make sense to begin a new course or professional development with a discussion. When students are complete novices, being asked to discuss new content is intimidating and often counterproductive. It's also unfair. How can people discuss something they know nothing about? When there's a history of institutional mistrust on the part of students, or when they've been burned by participating in discussions in the past, holding a discussion as the first thing you do is probably going to backfire.

Assumptions become tweaked over time, deepened in complexity. You realize that for a particular assumption to work, certain conditions need to be in place. For example, in my habitual, knee-jerk turn to discussion I've come to realize that discussions set up to explore contentious issues usually benefit if certain ground rules are stated early. In addition, I need to use protocols to secure everyone's participation and to give silent processing as much prominence as verbal exchange. I also know that discussion leaders need to be open to critique and willing to reconsider their own assumptions. So my implicit assumption that discussion should be used in all situations has been refined and contextually finessed through conscious examination.

To recap, critically reflective teaching happens when we build into our practice the habit of constantly trying to identify, and

check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers. The chief reason for doing this is to help us take more informed actions so that when we do something that's intended to help students learn it actually has that effect.

Types of Assumptions

Assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that guide our actions. In many ways we *are* our assumptions. They give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. Becoming aware of our assumptions is one of the most puzzling intellectual challenges we face. It's also something we instinctively resist for fear of what we might discover. Who wants to clarify and question assumptions they've lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find out that they don't make sense?

Of course assumptions are not all of the same kind. Some are broad in scope, some specific to a particular situation. Some are explicit, some implicit. I find it useful to distinguish among three broad categories of assumptions—paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

These are the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories. Usually we don't even recognize them as assumptions, even after they've been pointed out to us. Instead we insist that they're objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts as we know them to be true. Some paradigmatic assumptions I've held at different stages of my life as a teacher are the following:

- Adults are naturally self-directed learners.
- Critical thinking is the intellectual function most characteristic of adult life.
- Good classrooms are inherently democratic.
- Education always has a political dimension.

Paradigmatic assumptions are examined critically only after a great deal of resistance, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged the consequences for our lives are explosive.

Prescriptive Assumptions

These are assumptions about what we *think* ought to be happening in a particular situation. They're the assumptions that are surfaced as we examine how we think teachers should behave, what good educational processes should look like, and what obligations students and teachers should owe to each other. Note the word *should*. A prescriptive assumption is usually stated with that word smack in the middle. Organizational mission statements and professional codes of practice are good sources for revealing prescriptive assumptions.

Some prescriptive assumptions I've held or hold are the following:

- All education should promote critical thinking.
- Classrooms should be analogs of democracy.
- Teachers should clarify expectations, objectives, and criteria of assessment as early as possible in an educational episode.

Prescriptive assumptions are often grounded in, and extensions of, our paradigmatic assumptions. For example, if you believe that adults are self-directed learners then you'll probably assume that good teachers encourage students to take control over designing, conducting, and evaluating their own learning. And, of course, you shape your teaching to accomplish this, which leads us to the third kind of assumptions—causal.

Causal Assumptions

These are assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. They are usually stated in predictive terms. Examples of causal assumptions I've held or hold are the following:

- Using learning contracts increases students' self-directedness.
- Making mistakes in front of students creates a trustful environment for learning in which students feel free to make errors with less fear of censure or embarrassment.
- Rearranging rows of chairs into circles creates a welcome environment for learning that students appreciate.
- Teaching in teams opens students to a greater breadth of perspectives than is possible in solo teaching.

Causal assumptions are the easiest to uncover. But discovering and investigating these is only the start of the reflective process. We must then try to find a way to work back to the more deeply embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions we hold.

How Do We Examine Assumptions?

The best way to unearth and scrutinize our teaching assumptions is to use four specific lenses available to us: students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, personal experiences, and theory and research. Viewing what we do through these different lenses helps us uncover when and how certain assumptions work and when distorted or incomplete assumptions need further investigation. This can't be a one-time scrutiny; it must be consistent and regular—daily, weekly, monthly. That's the discipline of critical reflection.

Students' Eyes

Seeing ourselves through students' eyes makes us more aware of the effects of our words and actions on students. This helps us clarify our assumptions and decide when they make sense and when they need to be changed or discarded. A common meta-assumption is that the meanings we ascribe to our actions are the same ones students take from them. But when we collect data from students we see the different ways they interpret what we say and do.

Colleagues' Perceptions

Inviting colleagues to watch what we do or engaging in critical conversations with them helps us to notice aspects of our practice that are usually hidden from us. As they describe their readings of, and responses to, situations that we face, we often see our practice in new ways. Colleagues can suggest perspectives we might have missed and responses to situations in which we feel clueless.

Personal Experience

Our own experiences as learners provide important clues to the kinds of classroom dynamics that hinder or further the ability to learn. This is why I feel the best use of professional development money is to fund teachers to take a course release so they can enroll as learners in courses in which they are truly novices. Becoming a student enables you to study your experiences and transfer the insights about what does, or doesn't, work to your own teaching.

Theory and Research

Theoretical and research literature can provide unexpected and illuminating interpretations of familiar as well as newly complex situations. For example, reading Michel Foucault's (1980) analysis of power shed an unexpected but very illuminating light on my work as a teacher. Practices that I thought were transparent and empowering (for example, using learning contracts or rearranging classroom furniture by putting chairs into circles) were experienced

by some as invasive and aggressive or as trying to wish away my power in a wholly unconvincing way.

So What Makes Reflection Critical?

Most reflection remains within the technical realm. We reflect about the timing of coffee breaks; how to use blackboards, flip charts, or screens; whether to ban hand-held devices from class; or the advisability of sticking rigidly to deadlines for the submission of students' assignments. We can't get through the day without making numerous technical decisions concerning timing and process. These technical decisions become critical when we start to see them in their social or political context, influenced by the structures and workings of power that exist outside the classroom.

What is it, then, that makes reflection critical? Is it just a deeper and more intense form of reflection? Not necessarily. Informed by the critical theory tradition, reflection becomes critical when it's focused on teachers understanding power and hegemony. As such, critical reflection has two distinct purposes:

Illuminating Power

Critical reflection happens when teachers uncover how educational processes and interactions are framed by wider structures of power and dominant ideology. It involves teachers questioning the assumptions they hold about the way power dynamics operate in classrooms, programs, and schools and about the justifiable exercise of teacher power.

Uncovering Hegemony

Critical reflection happens when teachers try to uncover assumptions and practices that seem to make their teaching lives easier but that actually end up working against their own best long-term interests—in other words, assumptions and practices that are hegemonic. It involves examining how to push back against this exploitation by changing structures and alerting others to its presence.

Critical Reflection as the Illumination of Power

Structures and forces present in the wider society always intrude into the classroom. Classrooms are not limpid, tranquil, reflective eddies cut off from the river of social, cultural, and political life. They are contested arenas—whirlpools containing the contradictory crosscurrents of the struggles for material advantage and ideological legitimacy that exist in the world outside.

One of my flawed assumptions as a beginning adjunct technical college teacher was that what happened in my classrooms was largely of my own making. I assumed that what I did and the way that I did it were largely under my own control. Certainly I knew there were examinations I had to prepare students for and that these would test students' knowledge and understanding of the content outlined in the syllabus. But I viewed my classroom as my own domain. I believed I could make pretty much all the decisions about the timing and flow of how we covered the required content and that the teaching methods and approaches were chosen by me.

In fact, as I moved through my first few years of adjunct work it became increasingly evident that structures and forces completely out of my control substantially shaped my supposedly independent classroom universe. First, the syllabus reigned supreme in my kingdom. Classroom discussions would start to ignite as students brought in personal experiences but I'd constantly have to cut these short in order to get back to the "official" business of covering the designated content. Sometimes when students seemed the most engaged I had to act as the enforcer of dullness, dragging them back to the study of disembodied content. I couldn't contact examiners or syllabus designers to ask them to change the tests to reflect the new areas we were exploring in class. Because exam questions and curriculum were predetermined they existed in a universe to which I had no access. The timing of examinations was set years in advance so there was no opportunity to let discussions run on. If I did that we wouldn't have the time to cover the next chunk of