

Teaching Critical Thinking and Critical Consciousness through Literature in Third Level Education.

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Abstract

This research focuses on teaching for thinking and educating for critical consciousness in third level students through the medium of modern literature. The objective of this research is education as the practice of freedom; a means by which students deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world, thus becoming what bell hooks refers to as enlightened witnesses (hooks 2000). This research takes a critical constructive action research approach which allowed me to refine my methods and gain further knowledge about my practice whilst enabling students to become more effective critical thinkers and more critically conscious citizens. Action research acknowledges the social character of knowledge and a key conclusion is that modern literature can provide a gateway to a shared understanding, through which students can learn to think critically and become more critically aware. Greene (1988) views literature as a culture's *secular scripture*, an inexhaustible source of multiple perspectives on the human condition and ways to live more fully in the world, and this research confirms the study of imaginative literature as one way in which we can assist in our students' existential quest to understand and construct a meaningful life.

Keywords: Critical consciousness, critical thinking, critical reviews, literature circles, tutorials.

1. Introduction.

'The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination'
Emily Dickinson

How do you teach students how to think? This question is the seed crystal of academic thought surrounding the discourse on critical thinking within the third-level curriculum. As a lecturer with responsibility for teaching Critical Thinking as a core subject across a range of curricula, my

focus has been to find a way of teaching students to think that relies on a waking of the imagination coupled with engagement in the world beyond the self to develop critical consciousness. The research outlined in this paper is a systematic response to a situation I confront annually when teaching students who are crossing the bridge to third level education. Years of adhering to a didactic teaching model has resulted in learners unable or unwilling to engage in the process of critical thinking; that is, to analyse and evaluate lecture material and foster meaningful connections between theory and practice. This process requires a catalyst and it is my experience that modern literature can be such a catalyst for literature provides a lens through which readers can look at the world. Research in this context involves understanding differing perspectives and the purpose of this research is not to transmit a body of validated truths or outcomes but to reveal how perspectives come to be constructed and to enable students to understand the nature of interpretation which is, after all, a central feature of being an educated person.

Weber's description of the iron cage of rationality, Heidegger's analysis of science technology and Foucault's regimes of truth all depict the hegemony of scientific and technological ways of thinking within social reality, leaving little room for genuine agency on the part of students. Cognitive development presupposes a level of personal and intellectual agency and 'very little of current education is designed to help students to recognize their past conception on the basis of new experience and to develop personally generated insights and paradigms' (Diamond, 1988, p.139). The educated mind is fundamentally one with a capacity for free thinking and the competitive curricula of the modern education system do not foster intellectual freedom. This paper will argue that developing critical thinking and critical consciousness should be a key component of third-level education if we are to develop critical thinkers.

2. Research Objectives.

The primary objective of this research is to release the pedagogical potential of modern literature to facilitate critical thinking and critical consciousness in third level education, focusing on students embarking on their first year. The secondary objective of this research is to encourage students to read more. I have focused on modern literature, that is, the literature referred to in this research is exclusively composed during the twentieth century, for the following reasons; firstly, it would be beyond the scope of my research to seek to incorporate the whole of the

literary canon, and furthermore, the classic works of great literature have already been explored in great depth. Secondly, selecting modern literature allowed me to choose modern high-quality fiction focused on critiquing ideological distortions or connecting us with the uncertainty of our condition. While this focus is not exclusive to modern literature, conscious engagement with social concerns is more prevalent in modern literature due, perhaps, to greater intellectual freedom, less censorship and the influx of new cultural groups into the canon. Finally, students more readily relate to modern literature and when students relate to material, they are more motivated to engage with the material (Kostecky & Hoskinson, 2003). This was central to my aim of enabling students to think critically and engage critically with the world around them because if I couldn't motivate my students then I would be teaching in a vacuum.

Successful change initiatives don't occur in a vacuum nor are they isolated events. The enduring and successful change initiative is the result of linked steps and events, with each link building in a momentum that ultimately leads to the desired objective. This gradual but cumulative change in thinking and consciousness is what I have endeavoured to achieve with the tutorials, literature circles and critical reviews employed in this qualitative study. This approach parallels Mezirow's description of transformation as '*...a cumulative progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind...*' (2007, p.13). Literature, then, can be a powerful tool in fostering a curriculum of consciousness focused on developing culturally literate critical thinkers, moving beyond adherence to a structure of socially prescribed knowledge, to one that encompasses a gradual growth of consciousness into expression.

3. Conceptual Framework.

My conceptual framework draws primarily on the writings of Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene, because I think their works seek to understand contradictions that limit human beings from living up to their human potential. Although their works are similar, they have different foci. Freire's writings are driven by a desire for transformation, while Greene explores living in awareness in order to advance social justice. However, both theorists are united in their commitment to critical consciousness and it is this commitment which makes their work, for me, an integral part of this conceptual framework for providing a particular kind of education at third-level; the kind that fosters critical thinking and facilitates critical consciousness in students.

Although literature may not have been used specifically to foster critical thinking and critical consciousness in the past, as a society, we have always used books as a medium to instil truths about morality, empathy and etiquette; we have done so since Aesop's Fables. We use allegory as an entry point into theory; we have done so since Plato's cave for metaphorical interpretations often shed light in a way that literal and theoretical positions do not, indeed literature has been one of the principal modes of thinking about the world and the human condition since words were first committed to page (Mack, 2012). Literature not only represents to us our world but it also shows us ways in which we can change the world or adapt to changes which have already taken place without our realisation. Literature's cognitive dimension helps us cope with the current as well as future challenges by changing the way we think about ourselves, our society and those who are excluded from or marginalized within our society (Gerrig, 1993). It is this structure of meaning which guides the development of this research.

The position thus outlined in this research is that literature is an important tool in enabling students to think critically, engage in critical reflection, awaken the imagination and ultimately facilitate critical consciousness. Literature can be used to develop the imagination; to help us entertain ideas we never could have had, to interpret and translate our experiences, to shape our world, and to enlarge our imaginations, '*...to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves as a changed self and to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts...*' (Huck, 1987, p.56).

3.1. Critical thinking.

A clear understanding of the term critical thinking is a precursor to teaching for its development. Critical thinking has been examined in myriad ways by different scholars. However, it is universally accepted that critical thinking is the process of purposeful thinking that encompasses interpreting and understanding, analysing, drawing inferences, evaluating, explaining, and self-regulation of and pertaining to concepts, issues, questions and problems (Scriven & Paul, 2003). The primary preoccupation, then, of critical thinking is to supplant distorted thinking with thinking based upon reliable procedures of inquiry. This research is emancipatory in nature because where our beliefs remain unexamined, we remain in what Freire (1973) referred to as a state of naïve transitivity or non-critical action and we are not free; we act without thinking about why we act, and thus do not exercise control over our own destinies. Critical thinking, as Siegel observes, aims at self-sufficiency, and '*...a self-sufficient person is a liberated person...free from*

the unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified belief...' (1998, p. 58). This research aims to teach students to move beyond naïve transitivity or passive adherence to a dominant narrative and think autonomously and critically through the medium of modern literature.

A key motivation for carrying out this research was to encourage my students to see the literature they are studying as an important lens for understanding the world and for guiding action; above all, I wanted my students to be critical thinkers. Literature-based reading has an important effect on the development of critical thinking. A reader must recognize patterns within text, fit details into these patterns, then relate them to other texts and remembered experiences. Literature reading facilitates the development of critical thinking in numerous ways because it is a complex process that requires readers to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meaning of the text rather than passively receive a preferred reading:

'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological meaning' (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.' (Barthes, 1977, p.146).

3.2 Critical consciousness.

Moral consciousness, central to negotiating the challenges of the 21st century, is understood as a way of being which exhibits an engagement with meaning and positive change in one's social world and is characterized by ever-expanding circles of agency in the service of humanity. This moral consciousness was described by Freire (1973) as critical consciousness:

'Whether or not men can perceive the epochal themes and above all, how they act upon the reality within which these themes are generated, will largely determine their humanization or dehumanization, their affirmation as subjects or their reduction as objects. If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change.' (1973, p.13)

Critical Consciousness refers then to the ability to perceive social and political oppression and to take action against such inequalities which constitutes a state of critical transitivity wherein

subjects recognise and act upon their capacity to effect change. For Freire, the focus of education is bringing about a new social order by changing the structures of society and liberating the individual from a false consciousness which is unaware of the structural and historical forces which have domesticated her/him. The teacher is a facilitator who guides and questions instead of providing answers and directions for the learner. Freire described the true function of education as radical conscientization and called for a problem-posing approach to education as opposed to the more traditional banking form of education which involves stripping phenomena of their spatial and temporal context, thus preventing the oppressed from obtaining a truer understanding of the wider context of contingency to which the phenomenon in question relates (Freire,1970).

To open spaces for learning is, according to Maxine Greene, to give learners a sense of absence, of open questions lacking answers, of darkness unexplained. If people respond to all of this with a blank disinterest, they are, often without realizing it, acquiescing in the given, the fixed, the unchangeable. This acquiescence blinds us and binds us to a state of naïve consciousness (Freire,1973) and to move to the state of critical consciousness what is required asserts Greene is the imagination. To cultivate the capacity of imagination and the exercise of imagination, you read a novel, a play, a short story, or a poem. In other words, the narrative imagination supports the democratic and moral imagination. The nature of moral consciousness has been a central human concern for as long as humanity has existed. However, its comprehensive understanding and the implementation of this understanding into educational practices have become defining needs, as we recognize our interdependence and the complex problems we face in this age of turbulent transition to a global civilization. Critical consciousness thus stems from authentic moral motivation that underlies and empowers those who have achieved it. It involves elements of critical thinking, an understanding of causality, a grasp of the processes of history, and the ability to translate thought into action. The framework outlined here incorporates these elements to guide students on the pathway to critical consciousness.

4. Methodology.

The methodology I chose for this research was Critical Constructivist Action Research. The aim of action researchers is to bring about development in their practice by analysing existing practice and identifying elements for change. One of the most important aspects of action research

is that the process enhances teachers' professional development through the fostering of their capability as professional knowledge makers, rather than simply as professional knowledge users. Another important aspect is fostering the capability of the students, enabling them to engage in critical thinking and engage critically with the world around them. Taking an action research approach therefore allowed me to improve my own practice and gain further knowledge about my practice whilst enabling my students to become more effective critical thinkers and more critically conscious in their approach.

Before undertaking this research, I carried out a pilot study to identify and eliminate weaknesses inherent in the model. The feedback from the pilot project was instrumental in refining my research position and clarifying my research goals. As the curriculum map unfolded and was pedagogically validated in retrospect, it enabled me to anticipate future possibilities and provided me with a sense of direction without prescribing a fixed agenda for the curriculum is always in the process of becoming. Furthermore, in action research, a single loop of planning, acting, observing and reflecting can be regarded only as a beginning. If what is learned in one cycle is not applied judiciously in future cycles of modifying plans, implementing them, monitoring the amended action, and reflecting again, then the action research process disintegrates into mere problem solving or what Grundy and Kemmis refer to as '*arrested action research*' (1981, p.323). Most importantly, the pilot project deepened my understanding of action research as an iterative process. As understanding accumulates, the research process can be modified to capitalise on that understanding. A key learning from the pilot project was refining my initial idea of allowing students to choose any text, which involved an unmanageable amount of reading, to offering a list of texts from which student could choose. This list was guided by popular student choices in the pilot project.

This research was carried out on a cohort of 38 first year students taking a first-year module in Critical Thinking as part of an ARTS degree. The students in the cohort were majoring in Psychology, Sociology or Religion. The students were asked to choose a novel from a list of modern novels at the beginning of term. Each book on the list reflected engagement with a social issue that was being studied by the students on their course. Key concepts that were being analysed and evaluated include ideology, social structures, injustice, mental illness and faith. The novels and the key concepts therein were explored over the course of a semester in weekly tutorials wherein students were divided into literature circles and feedback was provided at the end of

term by critical reviews. A student from each of the three Major subjects was also interviewed at the end of the term to provide insights and feedback on their learning.

4.1 Tutorials and Literature Circles.

The research design utilized tutorials and literature circles to create a setting that would foster critical thinking in the classroom and facilitate critical consciousness. Tutorials emphasize the important process of coming to personal awareness about contemporary issues through critical engagement and personal exploration. The critical lens approach taken in the tutorials enabled the students to destabilize and deconstruct traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Feminist Lens) and interrogate privilege through analyzing the ways in which privileged groups benefit from such membership and emphasizing how privilege can be utilized in shifting cultural norms (Marxist Lens). The critical lens approach further invited students to question their perspectives and positionalities (Reader Response Lens). The overarching aim of this approach was to instill in students awareness of the plurality of perspectives that constitute reality, that realities are constructed in socio-historical, political, and economic contexts, and that our reading of the world is shaped by our positionality.

In literature circles, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The literature circles centralize critical dialogue for consciousness-raising, community-building, and cultural norm-shifting; this process seeks individual change as a path to systemic change. Each student within the literature circle has a designated role to play in the discussion, namely, connector, summarizer, illuminator and illustrator. This is to ensure, as far as possible, a collaborative approach with equitable contributions from each student in the circle.

The two-fold approach of weekly tutorials and literature circles over the course of one semester constituted a problem-posing approach within an environment of 'fellowship and solidarity' (Freire, 1970, p.85) akin to the pedagogical method outlined by Freire, focused upon reflection and analysis of the sociopolitical environment. In this method, students are encouraged to ask questions about issues that affect their lives and develop the critical literacy to 'read' social conditions that perpetuate injustice and marginalization among the oppressed, such as the inequitable distribution of resources and access to opportunity. Freire sees great potential for student empowerment in such a method:

'Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to the challenge. Because they respond to this as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.' (Freire, 1970, p. 62).

4.2. Critical Reviews.

The Critical Review consisted of 5 open questions, structured to ascertain the effectiveness of literature in developing student understanding of course content and enhancing critical thinking skills, as well as to determine whether the process resulted in any changes in perspective in the learner. At the end of term, the students were asked to complete a critical review to determine if their chosen novel was helpful in illuminating key concepts, deepening understanding of the concept and evaluating the concept from different perspectives. The purpose of the critical review was, firstly, to engage students in critical thinking and make connections between theory and practice to deepen understanding of the core concepts examined on their course. Secondly, I hoped to facilitate critical consciousness with the critical reviews by asking students to evaluate the texts from different perspectives and to reflect on any changes in perspective that occurred during or after reading the text. Finally, while the tutorials and literature circles focused on free and open discussion which is an important part of critical thinking and critical consciousness, I also wanted to engage students in autonomous learning and expressing their thoughts in written format because, as Moon (2004) observes, writing is central to the development and use of critical thinking in higher education. Writing is a vehicle for reflection and the writing process encourages the seeking of understanding and interpretation of principles, justifications and meanings (Morrison, 1996). This can lead students to perceive a need for change in their world, their relationship and attitudes, and to seek to change the attitudes of others, thus fostering the critical consciousness central to this study.

4.3 Interviews.

Interviews have the potential to yield rich data and, coupled with observations, allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people (Marshall 2006).

I carried out the interviews after the critical reviews to ascertain how useful the approach was in developing their critical thinking abilities and facilitating critical consciousness. I interviewed three students in total, as there were different subject majors represented in the cohort (Psychology, Sociology and Religion). The interviewees included a male student majoring in Sociology, a female student majoring in Psychology and a mature male student majoring in Religion. It was beyond the scope of this research to interview each student although this would surely yield rich data and offer myriad possibilities for future research into the pedagogical potential of modern literature.

5. Findings.

The social and educational world is a place full of contradictions and complexity and is thus not easily reducible to the atomisation process inherent in much numerical research. To that end, I abided by the principle of fitness for purpose in the choices I made. I have been further guided by the definition of qualitative research provided by Creswell as ‘...an *inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting...*’ (1997, p.15). I used student comments in tutorials to record the ongoing analysis and interpretation by students and create as holistic a picture as I can of a dynamic reality. I analysed the words by identifying patterns and themes. I included student comments about the literature circles to further enrich the data. I used critical reviews to engage students in writing critically about their responses and noted any changes in perspectives that have occurred. I analysed the reviews through coding key words and themes. Finally, I used interviews to report detailed views, confirm the responses received in the critical reviews, tutorials and literature circles, and triangulate the data. Ultimately the focus of this data analysis, a sample of which is provided below, is on participants’ perspectives and the changes therein, one of the key characteristics of qualitative research outlined by Creswell (1997).

5.1 Student Feedback from Tutorials, Literature Circles and Critical Reviews.

Following is a sample of responses from student feedback after a term spent engaging in tutorials and literature circles, using a critical lens approach and completing critical reviews. In an

attempt to capture the moments of illumination in the classroom, the moments when students begin to engage critically with a topic and start to see things from beyond their own perspective, I have included some student comments from tutorials. These remarks illustrate the changes that were taking place in the classroom as students began to think outside prescribed modes of learning. They started thinking for themselves, learning not only to view the texts from multiple perspectives but the world too, echoing Freire's assertion that in reading the word we read the world (2005):

'Boo Radley was so frightening at the beginning of the novel, by the end you realize it wasn't him, it was you. Fear comes from ignorance.'

Discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

The student's realisation was that his fear was a result of his meaning perspective. According to Mezirow (1981), meaning perspectives are acquired passively during childhood and youth, and are the target of the transformation that occurs through experience during adulthood. They operate as perceptual filters that determine how an individual will organize and interpret the meaning of his/her life's experiences. It is these meaning perspectives which Mezirow saw as the raw material of the changes that occur in transformational learning. Through a combination of reflection and discourse, as provided by the texts and the literature circles, the students were able to make a shift in their world view which produced a more inclusive world-view. For Mezirow, one of the benefits of transformational learning was the development of greater autonomy as a person, a defining condition of adulthood (Mezirow 1997) and a prerequisite to developing critical thinking and critical consciousness.

'I never realized that the Catholic Church was an organisation, I thought it just existed.'

Discussion of *South Dublin Literacy Class* by Paula Meehan.

A similar perspective change occurred for this student who, for the first time, questioned his meaning schemes and realized that something he accepted as 'natural' was actually a result of the dominant ideology that governed the society he lived in. This put him on a path of questioning and discovery which continued throughout the term and I hope will continue to influence his world view.

'It's like you can never not have an ideology because even if you reject an ideology that's another ideology. You just have to make sure the one you have works. When I thought about Miss Maudie I realized how hegemony works, the dominant group make the subordinate group think that this is the way it should be.'

Discussion of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

This student reflected on the role of ideology in shaping society and human behaviour and concluded that every society needs rules to live by, but the rules should be democratic. This indicated a movement towards evaluative knowing as the student was able to acknowledge uncertainty without foregoing evaluation. The student exhibited a deepened understanding of ideology and hegemony, two of the key concepts explored in tutorials and the student was further able to retrospectively negotiate meaning as she was now able to apply a level of criticality to the text.

'The novel allowed me to see the world through the eyes of a severely depressed young woman, it gave me a much deeper understanding of mental health, through Esther I was able to see how these symptoms affect an individual's behaviour and how a lot of her problems stemmed from her illness and I understood it differently and I began to wonder how many girls in my class feel like this and what supports are there for them. As a result, I got involved in Student Health Week and I feel more connected to why I am studying Psychology.'

Discussion of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath.

This student displayed a growth in understanding because not only did she experience a change in perspective, she also took action against the oppressive elements illuminated by that understanding, displaying a deepened consciousness of the situation leading her to apprehend the situation as transformative (Freire, 1970).

The findings indicated that a significant cohort of students reached the stage of critical transitivity outlined by Freire as the fourth stage of critical consciousness wherein there is a more in-depth analysis of problems and increase in agency. However, a more comprehensive action plan needs to be effected if students are to reach the final stage of critical consciousness, wherein there is a greater critical awareness, resulting from educational efforts and favourable historical

conditions and a sense of agency or being in action. Ultimately, I observed a growth in the epistemological understanding of the students with various levels of progression as students did not progress steadily from domain to domain and often shifted between domains. This aligns with the research carried out by Baxter-Magolda (1992) which found that students shifted somewhat haphazardly between domains and sometimes worked with different conceptions on different topics at the same time. Kember (2001) further noted that students could hold a range of beliefs that related to the poles of absolute and contextual knowing at the same time. These findings signify for me the need to be cognisant of the epistemological development of students as movement along this continuum is essential if students are to develop as critical thinkers and critical citizens.

5.2 Interviews.

A key finding from these interviews was that students reported becoming more assertive with critical thinking. They all agreed that they now felt more confident in asserting their opinions and participating in class discussion. Ellsworth (1989) observed that '*...confidence was cited as an almost necessary factor in engaging in self-directed learning...*' (p. 28) and the first student interviewed, whose chosen novel was 'Animal Farm' by George Orwell, articulated the growth in his confidence as the term progressed:

'Initially, I felt I had very little to add to the lit circle discussions but the more I got into it the more confident I felt about my opinions and by the end of term I felt like I could say what I wanted to say without feeling self-conscious. I was more confident about my thinking because I knew I had really thought about it and looked at it from both sides so I felt stronger when I was stating my position. I had never thought about my 'positionality' before I started this course and it really made me look at everything with new eyes, I think I understand better now why the world is such a different place for different people depending on your class, gender and so on. This book gave me an insight into sociology at work, it's one thing to read about ideology and hegemony, it's another to read a book like Animal Farm and see it played out, by the end of the book I just totally understood it. I like that the book wasn't just a text book but that I could relate to it and actually enjoy reading it.'

The student outlined the importance of the project in enabling him to make connections between the material he was studying and the application of the content to the social world. He further asserted that the project had exerted a long-term impact on his reading choices as he is now more likely to choose books related to his course content. This highlights the importance of choosing literature that will interest and motivate the students and helped to validate my decision to focus on modern literature.

The second student interviewed reflected upon her reading of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and asserted that the novel enabled her to deepen her understanding of key concepts from her course. She also highlighted the role of the text in creating awareness of the distress caused by mental illness and of the relationship between self, others and environment. The student further commented on her initial resistance to the review. Her comments highlight the scaffolding that is necessary at the initiation stage of such a project, developing student autonomy is important but students also need to be guided in the learning process and reassured that their goals are attainable:

'The book allowed me to see almost first-hand how a particular disorder can cause great distress and I began to understand through Esther's voice what it must be actually like for someone suffering and feeling so insignificant, and the role that the world she lived in played in her pain, like the expectations on her. I also got an insight into what it was like for the people who have to live with the person. I had never thought about that before. I felt so sorry for Esther's mother in the Bell Jar and I felt like her pain was forgotten about really. I was a bit daunted at the initial work of having to critically review a piece of literature within a psychological framework but the end result was a pleasant surprise, it was mainly that you were so excited about it that gave me confidence that I could do it in the beginning though and the fact that you seemed totally sure we would get to the end, I didn't mind doing the work, it was useful anyway, I just wanted to be sure that I could do it! The discussions were my favourite part of the project because it really helped me to clarify my ideas and sometimes it changed my mind, and I really got to know the group better as well.'

It was insightful to hear how students were affected by their engagement with different narratives. It seemed from the responses that narratives written from a third person or omniscient perspective are more useful in giving students a sense of how a particular concept or system

operates, for example the comment relating to the reading of ideology in *Animal Farm*. In contrast, narratives written in the first-person seem to be more useful in giving students an insight into how it feels to be affected by the concept under consideration, for example the comment relating to the understanding of the concept of depression as a result of reading *The Bell Jar*.

The third student, who was reading *Wreaths* by Michael Longley as part of a wider selection of poems by the Ulster poets, reported feeling initially overwhelmed by the thought of the critical review, particularly the writing and appropriating the metalanguage of critical thinking. Students are often alienated by the language of academia but, as Weber (2010) observes, an essential element of social transformation is learning how to put one's social reality into words using the 'codes and cultures of the dominant spheres' of society (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.354):

'Once I realized that everyone else was feeling more or less the same way as me I relaxed, I just didn't want to look stupid, you know. I came back to college after nearly a decade out of school and even words like 'critical analysis' and 'critical evaluation' make me feel a bit isolated. I actually think this is one of the best things I done because I'm not intimidated by the language the way I was when I started, I feel like I know what it means to be critical now and I feel like I am a more critical thinker, and I'm more aware of what's going on, my reading of the Ulster poets made me see and understand things so differently.'

The findings confirmed my belief that giving students a level of autonomy in the learning process and fostering student collaboration and engagement through the use of literature circles is integral to creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and engaged citizenship. Overall, the interviews were instrumental for me in evaluating the potential of modern literature to facilitate critical thinking and critical consciousness and both the students and I deepened our learning through the process of teaching them to value their participation in knowledge production.

6. Limitations.

It is inevitable that some students will be more enthusiastic than others in adopting this strategy. Moreover, to mitigate any negative effects of disorienting dilemmas on adult learners, educators need to be empathetic and compassionate in their approach and provide support for the learners

during the process. This requires a high level of engagement and commitment from the students as well as the researcher and presents an ongoing, albeit surmountable challenge. I responded to this challenge by involving the students in choosing the texts, advising the students of the topics to be discussed each week in advance, and giving them the choice not to participate at any point.

An obvious limitation of this study is the difficulty inherent in measuring students' abilities to think critically and this study cannot conclude causality between the use of specific pedagogical techniques and student improvement in critical thinking because self-assessed growth in critical thinking is not a direct measure of actual growth. Evidence that the two are positively related, however, lends credence to this study's design and validity of findings. According to Bowen (1977), the results of cognitive outcome studies based on objective measures are generally similar to those derived from students' self-reports. Assessing the stability of relationships among self-reports of cognitive abilities and actual test scores, Pike (1996) concluded that self-reports can be justifiably used as general indicators of achievement. The self-reports of the students who participated in this research clearly indicates that the students feel that they have developed their critical thinking abilities. In relation to critical consciousness, it would be naïve to think that such consciousness immediately develops in students, however, significant growth was reflected in the classroom exchanges outlined above and it is my hope that this growth will extend beyond the classroom as students catch a glimpse of what is possible.

Another limitation refers to the generalization of this research. On the topic of generalization, I think it is important to remind ourselves that pedagogic situations are always unique. I am aware of the necessity of active participation if the study is to prove worthwhile and having a cohort of students who were willing participants in this knowledge production was instrumental to my research. When I asked my students in the last week of term why they agreed to take on the extra work of reading literature for these tutorials they all agreed on three things; they found the project interesting and meaningful, they valued the opportunity to discuss their ideas within a supportive environment and hear other peoples' views and they were influenced by my enthusiasm for the study. These findings reinforce for me Sanders and McCutcheon's (1984) characterisation of practice, namely, that teaching occurs in a context shaped by interrelated factors such as the nature of the learners, relations among people, psychological factors and social norms and the teacher's personality and ability. Perhaps then, as van Manen (1984) observes,

'...what we need more of is theory not consisting of generalizations...but theory of the unique; that is, theory eminently suitable to deal with this particular pedagogic situation' (p.13).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations.

A number of implications and recommendations for practice are extrapolated from the findings that emerged from this research. Monolithic national cultures like Ireland have been challenged by the influx of new cultural groups, the breaking up of larger polities and the belated recognition of existing but suppressed cultural groups. This presents a significant challenge to not only what we teach, but how we teach it, in modern education. As Husen (1999) has noted, education is, by its very nature ethnocentric. And, I would argue it is therefore always political, undermining the notion of the apolitical sphere of the classroom and highlighting the importance of teaching with intent. While it is difficult to quantify changes in thinking, it is clear to me that changes did take place over the course of this research as students became more tolerant of diverse perspectives and willing to challenge the dominant narrative. The cultivation of tolerance in our students is instrumental in their movement forward as critically conscious citizens, for as Freire observed in an interview 'it is through the exercise of tolerance that I discover the rich possibility of doing things and learning different things with different people. Being tolerant is not a question of being naïve. On the contrary, it is a duty to be tolerant, an ethical duty, a historical duty, a political duty' (Freire, 1996). The willingness to challenge is also critical if students are to act as subjects in the creation of a better society. It is further clear to me that such change can be initiated but not fully accomplished on an hour-a-week basis over a semester. What is needed is deliberate and sustained engagement in teaching for thinking; in interrogating the structures that govern our society *with* our students; teaching our students to recognize social, economic and political oppression and to take action against these oppressive elements.

Education is the practice of making ourselves at home in the world through understanding. People learn by example and, as lecturers we need to be that example for our students, only then can we create critically conscious students who are at home in the world. Education opens the mind, broadens horizons and interests, connects disparate fields of experience and cultivates habits of contemplation. It draws upon existing curiosities while directing these along lines that are less narrow or parochial thus opening up a larger field of vision. The acculturation that it surely involves extends beyond gaining factual knowledge or learning how to see the world as

Homer or Shakespeare did, and includes extending student's acquaintances with the life-world and deepening their understanding of themselves. This paper took as a starting point that education, as a discipline, would benefit from a sustained engagement with literature and it is my conclusion that literature is an entry point into this space where imaginative transformation occurs. So, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson (2003, p.11):

'Do not spare to put novels into the hands of young people as an occasional holiday and experiment...If we can touch the imagination, we serve them, and they will never forget it.'

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