

Full Paper Submission to Stream 35: Generating Learning Environments for Critical Management Education: Where Are We Now, Where Should We Be Heading?

**Critical pedagogy and surface learning techniques: An oxymoron, or the pre-requisite for deep learning?**

Suzette Dyer and Fiona Hurd

Department of Strategy and Human Resource Management  
Waikato Management School, University of Waikato, New Zealand

[sdyer@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:sdyer@waikato.ac.nz)

[fah1@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:fah1@waikato.ac.nz)

**Abstract**

In this paper, we argue that surface learning techniques are the pre-requisite for deep learning. We do so by presenting in greater detail our own 'experiential learning' of the process of setting a complex essay assignment for a senior undergraduate class. When setting the assignment, we assumed students of a senior undergraduate management paper would already have the necessary skills to adequately complete the task. Clearly, we were wrong. We discuss how we drew upon surface learning techniques to develop the technical skills required to write a complex essay. By developing these technical skills, we were able to empower students to engage critically in the material we presented throughout the semester.

**Introduction**

The social reform perspective of teaching (Pratt, 1998) emphasises the links between the prevailing macro-level socio-political and economic context with micro-level class room material. Similar to the embedded assumptions of critical theorists (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Deetz, 1992; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Jermier, 1985), Pratt (1998) suggests such educators move the focus from individual understandings of subject matter to an understanding of collective consciousness. This is a process we attempt in our own teaching methods, by alerting students to the connections between day-to-day happenings, through a deconstruction of the historically embedded political, powerful, and dominant relationships prevalent in society.

We draw upon Friere's (1997) distinctions of liberatory and domesticating education to inform our teaching practice. Domesticating education upholds existing power relationships that advantage elite groups within society. Within management discourse, domesticating educational experience renders 'critique' as a process of diagnosing 'advantages' and

'disadvantages' of managerial decisions within a framework of profit maximization, underpinned by narrowly defined notions of organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980). There is a strong focus on creating, enhancing, and disseminating 'best-practice'; a process that systematises particular norms, values and beliefs. Such managerial education upholds the position of powerful elites, at the same time disengaging the learner from a critical appreciation of the historical, socio-political and economic situation of their lives. Such a focus develops mundane reasoners (Pollner, 1991). Taken to the extreme, this teaching-learning approach creates docile-utilisable individuals who can be relied upon to act in certain taken-for-granted ways (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980).

In contrast, a liberatory approach to education aims to deconstruct knowledge and enhance the critical capacity of learners by locating power-relationships within the broader historical, socio-political and economic context. Taken-for-granted truths, whether presented as knowledge, systems, or processes are considered as social achievements (O'Neill, 1986). Thus 'critique' becomes an inquiry into the politics of every-day life (Deetz, 1992). Like Boyce (1996), we believe that teaching critically provides a liberatory educational experience and is an act of praxis. By introducing students to these concepts we hope to facilitate deep learning and self-development (Entwhistle, 2000).

Deep-learning involves facilitating "students to become independent learners", taking responsibility for their own learning, and stimulating "students' interest in the subject matter" by enabling them to draw upon their own life experiences to create meaning for themselves (Kember and Kwan, 2002, p. 219). These aims require collaboration within the teaching-learning experience with the ensuing implications of creating a safe learning environment and understanding and facilitating the complexities of an increasingly diverse student body.

In this paper, we argue that surface learning techniques are the pre-requisite for deep learning. We do so by presenting in greater detail our own 'experiential learning' of the process of setting a complex essay assignment for a senior undergraduate class. The assignment was a 10-page group-based essay, with the topic: 'Critically discuss consumerism

and consumer sovereignty'. Our explicit interest in setting the assignment was to provide students with the opportunity to understand and apply critical theory, and assumed the challenge would be learning and applying a new theoretical perspective. In the lectures leading up to the submission date, it became apparent the entire class were having difficulty with the assignment. The groups did not know how to write such an essay. When setting the assignment, we assumed students of a senior undergraduate management paper would already have the necessary skills to do so. Clearly, we were wrong. We discuss how we drew upon surface learning techniques to develop the technical skills required to write a complex essay. By developing these technical skills, we were able to empower students to engage critically in the material we presented throughout the semester.

### **Deep learning within a critical pedagogy**

Since the 1990s, there has been a call within management education, in general, to move the emphasis away from traditional forms of learning which emphasise technical, procedural and academic skills, to 'student-centred learning, recognise[ing] the need for active and experiential learning strategies and promote knowledge transformation and reflection in learners' (Bisman, 2011, P. 315). Echoing the discussions in general education academia regarding the benefits of deep over surface learning techniques (Biggs, 1979; Kek & Huijser, 2011; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991), these calls have resulted in the development of curricula at all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate education, emphasising case studies, group-based learning, experiential exercises and 'collaborative' and 'democratic' classroom techniques. These methods are said to encourage 'deep learning', which involves facilitating "students to become independent learners", taking responsibility for their own learning, and stimulating "students' interest in the subject matter" by enabling them to draw upon their own life experiences to create meaning for themselves (Kember and Kwan, 2002, p. 219). There have been many studies espousing the benefits of these techniques for improving students reflective and critical thinking skills, and leading to improved teaching outcomes, and ultimately, improved student performance (Kek & Huijser, 2011).

We concur with these assertions, and indeed, our own pedagogical positioning over the past 15 years, as explicitly presented in previous publication, reflects this perspective:

‘We believe learning is about invoking change. From an individual’s perspective change may occur in terms of what a person understands (for example what is believed to be true, relevant or important) or it may occur at a physical, emotional or spiritual level. Ideally, change will be emancipatory, able to contribute to a person’s wellbeing and potential (Flood, 2001) but this is not always the case. Thus we believe those who aspire to ‘teach’ so others may ‘learn’ must be cognisant of the responsibilities involved, and the potential for unfair distributions of power (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004). Learning is an interactive process – it rarely occurs in isolation. Learning can thus be seen as able to occur at multiple levels and need not be restricted to the formal classroom setting. Interaction is key, as it is through social processes that knowledge may be developed and sustained (Burr, 1995). We draw on Brookfield and Preskill’s (1999) insights into how discussion and participation may be used in teaching to achieve such interaction, and hopefully learning.’ (Grant & Hurd, 2010, P. 3)

‘With Boyce, Deetz (1992), and others, we are committed to developing aspects of management education that opens the opportunity for critical reflection on the minute-by-minute involvement we each have (student/teacher, manager/ employee) in the fabrication of our society. The exercise[s] invites class participants to become more critically involved in the consideration of the impacts of changes in conditions of employment on the lives of employees and their own part in the construction and facilitation of these changes. It is designed to help students see how we are all engaged in the manifestation of the future.’ (Humphries & Dyer, 2001, P. 326)

We teach on a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, all taught through an intentional critical theoretical lens. These courses are in the areas of Gender and Management, Career Management and Development, and Organisational Behaviour. In our classrooms, we emphasise: experiential learning exercises; critical analysis and discussion of texts, media; reflective journaling; co-enquiry. In the past, these techniques have led to many transformative moments, and moment of great student (and teaching) success. However, we have become increasingly concerned about the teaching outcomes, as increasingly fewer students seem to experience these transformative ‘moments’. Our initial reaction was to

defer to a critique of the hegemony of western management education, and assess this as evidence of our students being increasingly better ‘trained’ to become docile functionaries (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980) of the corporation. In response, we developed new experiential exercises, required deeper reflection from the students, yet still were seeing mixed responses.

Our experiences with our 2010 July-December semester class *required* us to examine this issue more deeply, and we were surprised to discover a significant challenge to our (often fiercely protected) philosophy of deep learning techniques.

### **The Challenge to Deep Learning**

The class in question was a fourth year course in Career Management and Development, included in the Human Resource Management major. For many of our students, this course is taken as part of their last semester of their undergraduate study. The class had 22 students, 12 female, 10 male; and a mix of international and New Zealand students. The course is intentionally taught through a critical theory lens, with the aspiration that introducing critical analysis to students with a transformational intent might bring about change at personal and societal levels. In our experience however, the students entering this course are generally new to a critical teaching and learning perspective, and are expecting to undertake a functional career-theory paper. This observation is important to our considerations, as it indicates that the students involved are largely ‘mainstream’ management students, rather than students with a particular interest in critical theory or critical management studies.

The first assessment the students encountered was a group-based essay, designed as a non-threatening introduction to critical material, to beginning to reflect on learning, and to working within the group. This assignment was set in the first week and due in week 5 of the course, after we had covered introductory material on critical theory.

The requirements of the essay were printed in the course outline, which students are given in the first class:

This is a group essay and has a 10 page limit plus references. This essay provides groups the opportunity to tease out the major concepts of critical theory. Each group will comprise four students. Attendance in week two of lectures is highly recommended as this will prepare the groups for this essay. You need to consider the class exercise and relevant literature in relation to the essay topic. Attendance of week two lectures is highly recommended for this assignment.

Essay Topic:

Draw upon the concepts of critical theory to discuss consumerism and consumer sovereignty.

*Assessment Criteria*

Your grade will be dependent on your ability to:

- Identify the key concepts of critical theory from the literature;
- Identify the key concepts and major arguments or debates in the consumerism and in consumer sovereignty literature;
- Draw upon different and appropriate examples from the literature and from the stories of the 'Life of Mike' (Jermier, 1985) to help illustrate key concepts of critical theory, consumerism and consumer sovereignty
- Provide a high standard of presentation
- A properly formatted reference list (for good grades, there should be approximately 20 references, indicate who sourced which articles/references, and;
- Each student to provide a 50 word evaluation of their learning as a result of doing this assignment (papers that do not submit this evaluation will be marked out of 90%). This evaluation is to be included as an appendix.

From our position as teachers, we assumed that by the midpoint in their fourth year, they had the basic technical skills to write an essay. From our position, this was a fairly basic introductory exercise that would help familiarise students with some background critical theoretical concepts that might otherwise take significant amount of class time to cover. We expected the students to encounter some difficulty with conceptualising some of the critical concepts, and had prepared classroom discussion exercises to support this aspect. We allowed the students to self-select their groups, and outlined the assignment. All was running 'to plan'.

## **Findings:**

We quickly realised that this assessment was problematic. Within days, we began to have email enquiries from students, not (as we had expected) to clarify meanings of consumer sovereignty, or of hegemony, reification, emancipation, but rather to ask *how* to go about sourcing literature. Further, in each subsequent class, it became obvious that the students were significantly struggling with this task, yet much to our surprise, this was not a challenge on a *conceptual* level, but on a *technical* one. This is not to say that the students had a good grasp on the conceptual issues – quite the opposite – but their technical difficulties meant that they were unable to even *begin* to examine the conceptual issues. The students were unable to discuss any of these concepts in depth in class, the supporting discussions we designed were dominated by students asking questions regarding essay format and the skill of literature reviewing.

We began to realise that our students did not have technical skills to complete the essay, and that without these, there was going to be little chance of deep learning in this assessment. Feedback from all groups was that they didn't know how to write such an assignment, as reflected in the on-going discussions in class. An extension was granted, and the assessment became an 'assignment' for us - teaching the students the basic techniques of essay writing and literature reviewing. In seeming opposition to our pedagogical aims, little critical engagement with the material occurred during this task, as the focus became on the students learning the techniques of forming an argument, reviewing literature, synthesising literature, and applying a theoretical lens.

As instructed, the students prepared a short statement about their learning on this assignment. We had expected that this would be the space for them to deeply reflect on the implications of this literature for them, providing a space for them to start developing reflective skills. However, in line with our experiences above, students comments were centred on the learning involved in basic techniques of essay writing and group organisation:

*'This assignment has been challenging for me, as I have been taken out of my comfort zone. Through trying to understand a variety of different terms and definition which are in many of the articles.'*

*'I found the easy quite challenging because it was very complex and it took me time to get around the concepts and ideas. Once we defined our argument and had a focus it was easier to get my head around what we were asked to do.'*

*'This assignment proved a difficult to accomplish with all of us being guilty of missing meetings at certain points. However, we managed to pull together and get a good report done in the end. Our various approaches were one of our strengths.'*

*'I found that we needed to organize the topic and allocate specific tasks. According to each individual skill, the tasks are allocated to whomever feel comfortable doing it. I also found that we needed to finish the assignment before the due date so we would have time to check the grammars and words in the assignment.'*

We left this assessment feeling disheartened about how the remainder of the semester would proceed. However, much to our surprise, the students appeared to engage far more deeply and critically with the course material for the remainder of the course than had been our experience over previous years. We began to ponder whether there is a required element of surface learning needed within a critical pedagogical perspective, in order to empower students to engage critically with material.

As such, this year, we have adapted our courses to include aspects of surface learning techniques, *alongside* our deep learning techniques, and at this early stage, results appear to be pleasing. For example, a short traditional 'lecture' on literature reviewing resulted in a far higher quality of critical analysis of gendered messages in advertising in our 3<sup>rd</sup> year class, with not only the literature being reviewed far more skilfully and analytically, but also with

deeper analysis of the advertisements. Whether this continues to prove to be a fruitful combination remains to be seen, but early results lead us to be hopeful.

## **Discussion**

In reflection, there was a significant mismatch between our expectations of the skills our students would have learned in previous classes, and the technical skills they came equipped with. We are happy to shoulder some responsibility for this mismatch. We are also sympathetic to the drive within teaching at large, towards deeper forms of learning. However, our experiences as outlined in the paper lead us to ask - where are our students to learn the basic skills necessary to enable them to engage critically with material?

We question whether the privileging of 'deep learning' throughout the management teaching and learning realm (both critical and functional) has led to a neglect of basic surface techniques, even in our introductory first year management studies courses. Our evidence of this comes when these students reach the final stages of their undergraduate study, fully equipped at classroom discussion, group work, and other 'deep learning' techniques, but seemingly unable to construct an academic essay or literature review, or in many cases, even unable to read and comprehend an academic research article. Whilst, from a critical perspective, this is perhaps evidence of a rejection of the hegemony of western academia, and to be celebrated, as shown in this example, we find this to be a barrier to the students engaging critically with material. Therefore, whilst they can practically execute an experiential exercise, when it comes to meaningful analysis of the exercise, or to critiquing the managerial discourses around the management practices displayed in the exercise, they are seemingly less capable.

It appears that while there is much discussion about the disadvantages of surface learning, there is little exploration into surface techniques and skills, and how to ensure these are embedded in a deep learning pedagogy. In our attempt to develop our own critical teaching methods and skills, and enhancing the learning environment, have we lost sight of the need for well designed courses that are both content/discipline driven and well structured. Oftentimes, concern for content, discipline and structure are disparaged for being 'teacher-

centred' and merely promoting surface learning (Entwhistle, 2002). Our focus on content and structure reflect Kember and Kwan's (2000) description of the "T2" conception of teaching ("Teaching as making it easier for students to understand"), and termed the 'focus-on-student-learning' by Entwhistle (2002). These authors infer that this conception of teaching enhances surface learning as students merely reproduce formulated answers. Yet, Entwhistle (2002) suggests that educators may enhance student self-development through course and assessment designs that enable students to transform knowledge by making it meaningful to their own situation. We agree, and now believe, perhaps paradoxically so, that attention to content, sequencing of topics and assessments, enables us to introduce more complex concerns, and to critically locate the content of our discipline within the historical, social and politico-economic context within which management education resides.

Additionally, we are forced to confront whether the privileging (including our own) of deep learning within a critical pedagogy is an example of the 'arrogance' which CMS has been labelled with. Is this an example where we (CMS educators) have (with good intentions) decided that we 'know best' for our students, and that the 'right' way to achieve transformations in, and beyond, the classroom is to favour collaborative and democratic practices over traditional 'teaching'? Alvesson and Willmott (1996, P. 13) cite a goal of critical management education is to '...promote the potential of human consciousness to reflect critically upon such practices'. We are beginning to understand that in order to foster this *potential* in our students to reflect critically, we need to use surface learning techniques alongside deep learning techniques. Indeed, Bain (2004, P. B8) describes one '... aspect of a good learning environment is that it helps students themselves answer the question.' We have realised that part of helping our students *themselves* answer the question is to provide them with the necessary skills to do so. This does not make our teaching environment *less* critical, but *more* so.

We relate this to the work of Meyer and Land (2005). Meyer and Land (2005) describe how students may encounter barriers to transformative learning and may experience the feeling of being 'stuck' (P. 377):

Stuck places may occasion difficulty by presenting ‘epistemological obstacles’ (Brousseau 1983, 1997) that block any transformed perspective’ (Meyer & Land, 2005, P.377)

We posit that the lack of technical skills led our students to feel uncertain and anxious, which manifested in an inability to explore beyond the managerial perspective which had predominated their study thus far. In effect, their lack of skills became such a barrier that in the struggle to overcome this, they were incapable of also challenging previous assumptions.

Interestingly, according to Meyer and Land (2005), one critique of critical pedagogy is that the perspectives ‘positioning were inadequate to move students on from their stuck places, owing to the incapacity of rationalist approaches to tolerate the unknown and uncertain’. We concur that the ontological transformation we are requiring of our students in their first encounter in a critical management classroom, requires a far more complex exploration of our teaching techniques.

Is there a place for surface learning techniques, and if so, where is it? Is it alongside deep learning, or should it be reserved for introductory courses? Regardless of the answer, we remain committed to including surface learning techniques alongside deep learning in our critical management classroom, in order to give our students the skills necessary to critically engage with material, leading to transformative outcomes. We look forward to robust discussion of these issues in the CMS stream sessions.

## **References**

Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1996). *Making Sense of Management: A critical introduction*. London: Sage.

- Bain, K. (2004). What Makes Great Teachers Great? *The Chronicle Review: The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(31): B7
- Biggs, J. (1979). Individual Differences in Study Processes and the Quality of Learning Outcomes. *Higher Education*, 8(4), 381-394.
- Bisman, J. (2011). Engaged pedagogy: a study of the use of reflective journals in accounting education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(3), 315-330.
- Boyce, M. (1996). Teaching critically as an act of praxis and resistance. *Electronic Journal of Radical Organisation Theory*, 2(2). Retrieved 24 November, 2004, from [http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/Research/ejrot/Vol\\_3/Vol2articles/boyce/asp](http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/Research/ejrot/Vol_3/Vol2articles/boyce/asp)
- Clegg S., & Dunkerley, D. (1980), *Organization, class and control*. USA: Routledge.
- Deetz, S. (1992), *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Entwhistle, N. (2000). Promoting deep learning through teaching and assessment: conceptual frameworks and educational contexts. Paper presented at the TLRP Conference: Leicester: November.
- Fournier, V., & Grey, C. (2000). At the critical moment: Conditions and prospects for critical management studies. *Human Relations*, 53(1), 7-32.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (new revised 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition). New York: Continuum.
- Grant, S., & Hurd, F. (2010). Incorporating critical pedagogy into the scholarship of teaching and learning: making the journey alongside our students. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 4(2).
- Humphries, M., & Dyer, S. (2001). Changing the nature and conditions of employment: Stimulating critical reflection. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(3), 325.

- Kek, M., & Huijser, H. (2011). Exploring the combined relationships of student and teacher factors on learning approaches and self-directed learning readiness at a Malaysian university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(2), 185-208.
- Kember, D. & Kwan, K. (2002). 'Lectures approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching' in N. Hativa & P. Goodyear (Eds.), *Teacher thinking, beliefs and knowledge in higher education*. Kluwer Academic Publishers: the Netherlands. (pp. 219-240)
- Jermier, J. (1985). When the sleeper wakes. A short story extending themes in radical organisation theory. *Journal of Management*, 11(2), 67-80.
- Meyer, J., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49(3), 373-388.
- O'Neill, J. (1986). The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault. *The British Journal of Sociology*, xxxvii, (1), 42-60.
- Pollner, M. (1991). 'Left of ethnomethodology: The rise and decline of radical reflexivity'. *American Sociological Review* 56:370-380.
- Pratt, D. (1998), *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Florida: Krieger.
- Trigwell, K., & Prosser, M. (1991). Improving the Quality of Student Learning: The Influence of Learning Context and Student Approaches to Learning on Learning Outcomes. *Higher Education*, 22(3), 251-266.