EXAMPLE 1

A comparison of two theories of the learner and learning

Introduction

Theories about the learner and the learning experience are central to the fields of education and psychology. In this essay, I will discuss both these concepts in relation to neoliberalism and critical pedagogy. I will explore how the individual learner and their role is conceptualised, the relationship between the individual learner and their environment, and in addition, the weight that each theory gives to individual capacity and collective endeavour. I will also discuss the approach of each theory to epistemology, ontology and methodology and I will explore how each theory conceptualises a good teacher. I will also outline the significance of society, culture and politics to both the selected perspectives.

How the individual learner is conceptualised in both the selected theories

With neoliberalism, the learner is seen as a consumer rather than as a producer of knowledge (Marginson, 1997, p.5). Neoliberalism emphasises marketization and views education as providing a service to its attendants, and the knowledge needed to succeed in a competitive capitalist corporate working environment. Students and parents are increasingly being given choice regarding the educational institution they attend, and therefore are not viewed as active thinkers in the learning process. They are clientele who are receptors of the academic knowledge needed to pass exams and, in the long term, obtain good jobs (Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004). I strongly disagree with the increasing marketization of educational institutions because it devalues the original thought and initiative that are crucial to life after formal study. Formal learning should not be overridden with objectives and bureaucratic aims but instead it should take place in an environment open to lateral thinking. Initiative is needed in everyday unforeseen events.

Critical pedagogy views the learner as an active constructer and producer of knowledge and original thought (Jarvis, 2005, p.99). Paulo Freire (1970), a key critical pedagogue, argued that education should cultivate students’ skills regarding self-realisation and also nurture the ability to challenge common-sense beliefs rather than just accept the status quo. Academics such as Kellner (2000, p.197), argue that critical pedagogy should aim to create educational institutions which exist with the sole purpose of making a social rather than economic contribution to society.

The approach each theory adopts in relation to epistemology, ontology and methodology

A functionalist perspective is central in terms of the epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches of neo-liberalism. Functionalism views all aspects of society as predominantly harmonious and as having a crucial contribution to its survival (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). As neo-liberalism sees no major flaws in the structure of a capitalist society, without major state intervention (Danzelot, 1984) both ontologically and epistemologically the ideology views there being no need to seek an alternative notion of the truth than what appears on face value. As neo-liberalism is not concerned with the subjectivities of society’s citizens (Hall, 1988, p.152), students in a neo-liberalist education system are prescribed hard facts that fail to take into account any consideration of individual differences and needs. Neo-liberalist education fails to challenge common discourses and thus never sets out to seek alternative views on the way in which society could alternatively operate. Neoliberalism takes a positivist stance and believes that there is truth in scientific psychological research regarding the way in which people learn.

Critical pedagogy takes both a radical humanist and radical structuralist approach with regard to epistemology, ontology and methodology. It is concerned with changing and challenging common societal discourses and its larger, overriding structures. Unlike neo-liberalism, it sets out to pose questions regarding those of truth and aims to discover alternatives to everyday norms that it views as expressive and exploitive (Gore, 1994, p.111). A critical pedagogical approach is taken by Reynolds and Martusewicz (1994, p.224) when they state that freedom is an active process whereby we have to change both our own thoughts and those of others. Critical pedagogical education takes a strong interpretivist stance and fosters the idea that there is no universal foundation for truth and objectivity. It values research however is conscious that any research undertaken is determined by “inherently subjective perspectives” (Leistyna and Woodrum, 1996, p.4).

The weight given to individual capacity and collective endeavour

With regard to the weight given to individual capacity and collective endeavour, neo-liberalism and critical pedagogy vary considerably. Neoliberalism places great emphasis on the individual whereas critical pedagogy favours collectivism.

Neoliberalist discourse is a strong example of Sampson’s (1988, p.1288) notion of self-contained individualism which is “the belief that each of us is an entity separate from every other and the group.” It promotes the idea that the individuals’ main focus is the self and that people should be self-sufficient regarding their finances and their achievements. This neoliberal belief is reflected in both Conservative and New Labour government initiatives such as Margaret Thatcher’s right-to-buy scheme (Colclough, 1991, p.203) as well as the Conservative’s continuous roll-back of the state. Dardot and Laval (2009, p.164), for example, argue that throughout time Conservative governments have dismantled solidarity by withdrawing financial support for those in need.

A fundamental principle of critical pedagogy, on the other hand, is collective endeavour and “the need to include all voices in the learning process” (Leistya and Woodrum, 1996, p.5). Critical pedagogues argue that positive change can only come about through unity and the engagement and sharing of different individuals’ ideas and opinions. This philosophy respects individualism but sees major advantages in cohesive activities and the learning experience. I believe that the promotion of cohesive actions in society is extremely positive and will lead to more efficient ways of dealing with societal issues.

The relationship between the individual learner and their environment

Regarding the relationship between the individual learner and their environment, there is a significant difference between neoliberalism and critical pedagogy. When discussing environment, this essay is referring to both the immediate educational environment and the wider societal and community environment. Neoliberalism views the individual as submissive to their environment, not encouraged in an educational context to reflect and critique their surroundings. Instead of promoting curiosity, neoliberal education emphasises the principal focus of learning to be preparation for the job market (Harris, 2007, p.19).

Contrastingly, with critical pedagogical education, the individual is an active participant in relation to their environment, encouraged to critique educational practices and urged to reflect upon the neoliberal principles shaping current educational institutions (Kascák and Pupala, 2011, p.147). I believe that the critical pedagogical teaching method is superior to that of the neoliberal philosophy, because change that puts people before economics is only likely to occur if the current status quo is reflected upon.

How the role of the learner is conceptualised

The role of the learner also differs greatly between neoliberalism and critical pedagogy. Neoliberalism views the learner as a market asset to the educational context of which they are part (Giroux and Giroux, 2006, p.24). As a result of neo-liberal influenced governmental policy, schools have been increasingly forced to compete in an educational market in which quality is assessed in the form of exam result league tables (Barry *et al,* 1996, p.28). The more academically successful the pupil, the greater benefit they are to the school. Although neoliberalism is currently the dominating societal ideology, its principles are heavily criticised by some critics. Portelli and Konechy (2013, p.89), for example, state that neo-liberal culture is oppressive and “has a detrimental influence on any and all commitments to democratic ideals in educational settings.”

Critical pedagogy views the learner as being an active and reflective thinker who poses questions regarding common societal discourses. Critical pedagogues want learners to eventually make a difference to society as a result of the education they receive. This could be attempting to tackle discrimination for example (Berlak, 1994, p.38). Ellsworth (1994, p.102) argues how education is a means to promoting an antiracist society and states that because topics such as inequality and discrimination will be actively discussed in critical pedagogically rooted learning environments, learners will grow to eventually create institutions that “embody justice, respect, and the absence of oppression.”

How each perspective conceptualises a good teacher

Each perspective presents a contrasting view of a good teacher. Neoliberalism requires the instillation of society’s prerequisites to learners through an authoritative pedagogy (Hayek, 1949, p.6), with the teacher as a transmitter of ED Hirsch’s (1993) concept of “core knowledge”. Supporters of core knowledge strongly oppose democratic teaching techniques, such as individualisation, and place great value on whole class instruction, prescribed knowledge and rigorous objective tests. This can be seen as the banking teaching method (Bridges and Jonathan, 2002) in which “the teacher assumes the students to be empty of knowledge and void of life experiences” and thus simply offloads pre-decided facts and ideas. I think that this method has a detrimental impact on the ability to think critically for both students and teachers. This negative view is also taken by Portelli and Konechy (2013, p.92) who note that school systems organized according to the “results-based logic of neoliberalism instrumentalise teachers and dehumanize students.” Both Lyotard (1984, p.4) and Smyth (2001, p.39) also note that within education, there is an ever increasing lack of imaginative space. From my experience working in a mainstream school, I certainly agree with this statement.

Critical pedagogy requires the teacher to engage pupils in an active learning experience in which they are given the chance to engage with societal issues and reflect upon the environments in which they are situated (Bruckerhoff, 1994, p.87). Teachers are expected to create an environment in which debate, critical reflection, and negotiation are defining aspects and are also expected to generate an environment in which all classroom participants are able to act as learner, knower, and teacher (Giroux, 2011, p.3). I agree with Reynolds and Martusewicz (1994, p.224) who state that “educators of all levels have an enormous responsibility in the practice of freedom.” I believe that although there are “overriding pressures” (Chomsky, 1994, p.141), teachers should be courageous and try to change the institutions within which they work by encouraging their students to think critically about them. I agree with Apple (1999, p.199) who states that an education that fails to take into account everyday struggle that result from overriding forces, such as neoliberalism, is not worthy of being labelled as education.

The place and significance of society, culture and politics in each specific theory of learning

Both perspectives are similar with regard to the significance they place on society, culture and politics. Essentially, both are sociological and extremely political theories that can be applied into other domains of social life. Neoliberalism is concerned with the marketization of all services in society (Turner, 2008, p.116), education being just one example, and critical pedagogy is concerned with the changing of societal structures as a result of effective teaching practices that encourage learners to recognise that the most indoctrinated practices in their lives (Giroux and McLaren, 1996, p.323) are a result of an ideological arrangement. Although neoliberalism is the most dominant practice regarding the general western context, critical pedagogy has infiltrated educational environments and individual teaching practices on a macro-level (Arshad, 2012, p.4). Although it is almost impossible to think of policies being developed that are not neo-liberal and are “not subject to the aim of economic production” (Billington, 2000, p.79), I believe that critical pedagogy is a powerful concept that is increasingly gaining recognition and praise.

In relation to culture, which is defined as “The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014), with neoliberalism, the view that capitalism should be overriding and thus remained unchallenged, is central (Harris, 2007, p.4). I believe that as neoliberal philosophy places little value on collectivism, which is a key component of culture, it fails to take into account the achievements and work of people that are unrelated to economic production. This, in my opinion, is an extremely dismal ideology to live by. I favour the critical pedagogy view that embraces, respects and acknowledges that culture is a huge part of human life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have examined how neoliberalism views the learner as a consumer of knowledge and how critical pedagogy views the learner as a producer of knowledge and individual thought, capable of challenging the status quo. I have shown how functionalism and a non-critical view of society is central to a neo-liberal approach, whereas critical pedagogy takes both a radical humanist and radical structuralist view. I have shown how neoliberalism places emphasis on the individual whereas critical pedagogy favours collectivism.

With regard to the individual learner and their environment, I have shown how there is a fundamental difference between neoliberalism, where the learner is a passive occupant of their environment, and critical pedagogy, where they are an active and critical participant. Neoliberalism views the leaner as a potential market asset, whereas critical pedagogy views the learner as an active and reflective thinker. I have shown how each perspective views the ideal teacher differently, respectively as a transmitter of core knowledge as opposed to someone supporting an active learning experience.

Despite their differences, both approaches are in fact similar, with regard to the significance they place on society, culture and politics. Neoliberalism sees capitalism as the norm whereas critical pedagogy can be a catalyst for analysis, challenge and ultimately fundamental societal change.

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