

The Curious Power of Alienation
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Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It is part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit (Swift 1983: 178).

It is my contention that alienation is a necessary dimension of learning as it is the foundation of critical thinking. If students are to think critically they must cultivate the ability to make the familiar strange, to estrange themselves from their commonsense taken for granted knowledge of the world. Critical thinking then involves epistemological alienation, knowing the world in an estranged fashion. However, this alienation is not a stable trait but an “emergent situation” (Seeman 1983) within the dialectical relations of learning. Dialectical learning is characterized by a spiral movement in which the familiar becomes transformed (sublated) into the alien and then into the familiar once more. Alienation is therefore a key moment in the development of “epistemological curiosity” (Freire 1998), the passion for knowledge which emerges from engagement with the dialect and which connects learner and teacher to each other and to academic life.

However, in learning within the corporate university, the creative power of alienation can become negated and the development of epistemological curiosity repressed. As Mann (2001) argues, Marx’s theory of alienation remains a fruitful way of understanding this situation. The commodification of learning within asymmetrical power relations create alienation effects in which learners and teachers become alienated from self, other, the knowledge production process and the knowledge produced (Fromm 1962, Ollman 1976). Thus, such power effects (mediated by differing class, gender, ethnic, generational and other positions), create both epistemological and ontological alienation.

At a time when students appear to be adopting the identity of investors governed by the neoliberal cost-benefit calculus, rather than scholars motivated by a passion for knowledge, how can the curious power of alienation be realized? A possibility resides in teachers assuming the identity of provocateurs (English & Stengel 2010). By provoking creative alienation effects in learning, albeit within the wider context of repressive alienation; by dialectically opposing neo-liberal necrophily with radical biophily (Fromm: 1964).

Fromm’s (1960) work suggests that the deadening alienation, the “moral isolation” of screaming alone/ together can be transformed into connectedness through enacting a humanistic ethic of reason, imagination, and love. Although I find the idea of teaching with love alien, fortunately, Fromm (1978:171) does insist that love can only be developed alongside a shared “capacity for critical, unsentimental thought”.

References

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