

## Critique as Situated Practice: Implications for Pedagogy

Deborah Kerdeman

*University of Washington, Seattle*

How can teachers help students critique the status quo and work to mitigate social injustice? Wrestling with this important question, Cristina Cammarano argues that critique is neither trivial nor ineffective. Students must and can be taught to think critically and to redress the injustices that critical thinking reveals.

I resonate with Cammarano's claim that critiquing injustice is both necessary and possible and that critique should inspire students to improve social conditions. But I worry that Cammarano's view of critique may make it difficult for students to challenge their assumptions and may also impede them from counteracting inequity. My worry stems from Cammarano's claim that critiquing social reality requires "stepping out of it." I want to examine the problems that this assumption raises, suggest another way to think about critique, and reframe the pedagogical exercise Cammarano proposes.

According to Cammarano, "frameworks cannot be grasped from within." This is because "the reality one is immersed in is viscous." By viscous, Cammarano means that familiar assumptions are comfortable, difficult to surface and challenge. They lull us into believing that the status quo is necessary and unalterable. To recognize that social situations are contingent and amenable to reform, we must distance ourselves from the "sticky" reality in which we unreflectively live and intentionally engage in meta-critique, i.e., theoretical reflection. Whereas implicit assumptions are trapped in particular realities, meta-critique considers "reality as a whole" and also reveals conditions, which make reality possible. Following Boltanski and the Frankfurt School, Cammarano focuses on unjust social structures, such as the inequitable distribution of resources. Achieving critical awareness of unjust structures "renders reality unacceptable" and "morally problematic."

While theory exposes inequitable structures, it also reveals that inequity is only one possible condition. One can imagine other conditions and social structures. Thus, in addition to helping students engage in critical reflection, teachers also must help students appreciate that reality can be changed and that change can occur through their actions. Unlike the “critical powerless student” who sees injustice but feels “limited and hopeless,” Cammarano wants students to care about and redress the injustices they critically examine. To stimulate critical reflection and action, Cammarano invites students to explain schools to aliens and to design an ideal school that is equitable and just.

Cammarano’s pedagogy is hopeful and pragmatic. Nonetheless, it straddles a tension, which she doesn’t fully resolve. On the one hand, Cammarano argues that in order to examine taken-for-granted beliefs, de-familiarize everyday reality, and illuminate the contingency of social conditions, students must achieve the “external standpoint” of theory. But Cammarano also believes that counteracting injustice requires students to care about the reality that theory exposes. Students will not challenge injustice, Cammarano acknowledges, unless they “own” the reality they critique and believe that their actions will matter. Thus, if critical *reflection* requires students to “step out of” reality, critical *action* requires students to embrace unjust reality as their own. In short, Cammarano’s pedagogy requires students (and teachers) to be both detached from and also attached to the unjust reality they aim to reveal and repair.

To diminish this tension, Cammarano turns to Silvia Montiglio and Megan Laverty. Both scholars argue that theory and ordinary understanding are complementary, not opposed. Montiglio says that theory signifies a “higher degree of involvement than that of a spectator.” Laverty shows that critical reflection, while painful, helps clarify the reality in which we live. Thus, while theory may require distance, critical distance is not necessarily alienating. In Cammarano’s words, “The position that makes theory possible ... is tangled with interest and care.”

I agree: it is important to be critical and caring. I also appreciate Cammarano’s intuition that acting implies caring, and that caring implies being entangled in situations. But entangling theory with interest and care does not

resolve problems that continue to inform Cammarano's conceptualization of theoretical reflection. Two problems are noteworthy. Both stem from Cammarano's assumption that critique requires us to step out of the reality in which we live.

First, as Cammarano intuitively feels, stepping out of reality is existentially impossible. We can't float free from our existence in order to see it more clearly. Rather, we interpret the meaning of our existence in the course of living our lives. Interpretation is possible because we inherit a framework of socio-cultural-historical meanings that orient us in the world. This framework of pre-understandings is not a trap that prevents new understanding. Pre-understandings can be criticized and changed. But new understanding is not achieved by shedding our interpretive lenses or by distancing ourselves from the network of meanings that makes understanding possible. To paraphrase Aristotle, without the guidance of situated interpretive frameworks, human beings would either be all-knowing gods, or else they would be beasts: intelligent but lacking self-awareness.<sup>1</sup>

New, more critical, expansive understanding thus always proceeds from within a particular framework. In the language of hermeneutics, understanding particular parts improves our understanding of a "whole," even as understanding a "whole" enhances our understanding of particular parts. Seeing the whole of a story, for instance, changes how we understand the meaning of particular chapters, even as the meaning of the story changes, depending on the perspective that a particular chapter affords.

Thus, we always and necessarily are situated in meaningful contexts, which we cannot escape at will. This point leads to a second issue. As Cammarano indicates, social contexts are structured inequitably. Because she believes that inequitable structures cannot be recognized from within, she devises a thought experiment that invites students to step back from these structures in order to observe them more clearly. But a thought experiment that invites students to observe inequitable structures objectifies them. Objectifying unjust structures, we assume we can understand them without being involved in or affected by them. Of course, if unjust structures don't affect us, they will not necessarily be affected by what we think or do.

Stepping back from injustice thus does not necessarily help us “own” problems we critically understand or inspire us to redress them. I therefore want to suggest a view of critique that does not step out of reality but instead arises *in situ*. From this perspective, injustice is not an object we observe: it is a situation we inhabit, an experience we live through. People interpret the experience of injustice in different ways. Those who are marginalized by inequitable structures tend to understand this experience viscerally. Visceral understanding of injustice can be expressed in a range of actions, such as resistance, protest, or justice-work. By contrast, those who benefit from inequitable structures tend not to realize how these structures privilege and normalize their experience. They therefore may act in ways that perpetuate complicity and complacency. But whether one acknowledges injustice or is blind to it, understanding is not divorced from action: understanding instead is expressed in a particular kind of action. How can teachers help students act in ways that are critically awake?

To answer this question, let's return to Cammarano's thought experiment and consider it from the perspective of privileged students. Explaining schools to aliens may not necessarily help privileged students de-familiarize their situation or stimulate them to recognize their deepest assumptions about school. Not all students believe that schools hold them hostage, for example, or that belonging to a situation is sweet. Unless students interrogate how their understanding is a socially positioned experience, they may fail to see that their views may not be general but instead may reflect a particular privileged perspective.

Achieving critical awareness is more likely if students can interact with others who share their situation, but whose perspectives differ from and challenge their own. Conversing with a partner who looks forward to school as a respite from a difficult home-life, or with someone whose critical awareness of racism underscores the bitterness of this experience, may help students see that their own point of view is narrower or more distorted than they had realized. Their understanding of school consequently may change to become clearer, more expansive, and critically reflective.

Participating in these types of conversations does not require students to connect understanding and action. Experiencing a partner's challenging

perspective necessarily engages understanding on some level. The pedagogical goal is to help students learn to be open to experiences that interrupt their comfortable understanding and transform complacency into critical awareness. Framing critique as a situated practice does not guarantee that students will become more critical. It rather raises a different pedagogical question: How can we teach students to be open to challenging perspectives that help them recognize and critique their assumptions and transform their self-understanding as actors in an unjust world?

---

1 See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.