

CAN WE REACH A RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM AND NURTURANCE?

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Teachers in contemporary North America are increasingly expected by students, by colleagues, by ourselves, to be nurturant and caring educators. But when we try to combine these expectations for care and nurturance with the standard educational task of assessing and criticizing our students' work, we encounter tensions between what seem to be conflicting demands for care and criticism.

In her account of what she terms "paradoxes" in feminist pedagogy, Kathryn Morgan describes her own heightened awareness of this tension. Morgan observes that our feminist teachers are "expected to be nurturant, to be supportive, to respond to students' legitimate needs for growth and reassurance." In addition, we are "expected to implement an 'ethics of care', to be available to listen, to offer counsel, and to give support and encouragement."¹ But when we try to meet these expectations and also to undertake the usual pedagogical tasks of educational criticism, we encounter one of Morgan's "paradoxes":

I believe there is a deep paradox in thinking of pedagogical mothers criticizing, challenging, calling into question, posing contrary evidence, developing counterexamples, and detecting contradiction and other forms of inconsistency and inadequacy in the students they are nurturing. And it is even more paradoxical, I submit, to see this very process of criticism as the nurturing.²

Although our experiences with feminist pedagogy, plus recent calls for an ethics of care in education, along with widespread concern about the place of nurturance in schools have all combined to accentuate these difficulties, the general tension between nurturance and criticism is not a new educational problem. And we do have, therefore, a number of already existing responses, both traditional and contemporary. Taken together these responses provide us with opposing, indeed often contradictory advice. The range of advice does, however, help us to map the contours of the problem in its standard form.

In this paper I explore the possibility of a rapprochement between educational criticism and nurturance. I first consider three different ways to configure the relations between nurturance and criticism. Although all three of these approaches are informative, they are also partial and problematic. I conclude, therefore, that we need to look further. Drawing upon presuppositions from feminist pedagogy and key tenets from an ethics of care, I then suggest an alternative configuration.

TO NURTURE IS TO CRITICIZE

When Kathryn Morgan writes "it is even more paradoxical, I submit, to see this very process of criticism as the nurturing,"³ she calls our attention to one longstanding traditional response from what we might term the "For Your Own Good" model. A central claim here is that on a proper understanding of what nurturance is, we can see that "To Nurture Is to Critique" and "To Critique Is to Nurture." The mistake we need to avoid is that of confusing indulgence, or "spoiling the child" with "nurturance." If we truly love and care for our children we don't spoil them or overindulge them; rather we expect, demand, require, and teach adherence to certain standards of behavior for the sake both of the child and of the community.

Whatever educational aim or metaphor one chooses — initiation, growth, development, empowerment, enhanced freedom, responsible citizenship, etc. — the teacher’s job is to help the student “learn” to contribute to the student’s “progress.” The teacher is not there simply to indulge the whims of students in a willy nilly fashion, devoid of any standards or criteria.

Not to make appropriate demands, not to expect and require adherence to standards is to confuse nurturance with neglect, to conflate care and indulgence. The tasks of teaching require us to make real demands upon students, to hold them to standards of achievement; to expect otherwise is to underrate the teaching function and to overromanticize the teacher-student relationship.

Although we may not state our beliefs in precisely these terms, as teachers most of us do feel the pull of similar “for your own good” claims; and we accept the tasks of pedagogical criticism, whether it be with reluctance, enthusiasm, or simple matter-of-factness, as part of the teaching imperative. Furthermore these criticisms are well-intentioned, are taken to be “for the good of” the student, even if we do not necessarily equate them with “nurturance.”

But when we turn to the experiences of students themselves, when we observe the actual effects of pedagogical criticism, we encounter a dissenting viewpoint, accompanied by an alternative account of what is happening. In brief, the recipients of criticism frequently do not equate it with nurturance, and they generally fail to perceive criticism as part of any larger nurturant configuration.

Most students and many of the rest of us experience criticism as a form of attack. For women, in particular, we find that criticism often reinforces our own self-doubts, and may discourage our already tentative risk-taking efforts. For most people criticism tends to elicit defense mechanisms, to result in resentment and antagonisms, and to siphon off energy into defensive maneuvers — all of which interfere with or disrupt the advancement of any further learning. It is observations such as these which lead to the “Never Criticize” position.

NEVER CRITICIZE

One of the strongest proponents of the Never Criticize position is William Glasser. He does not deny the good intentions of those who pursue a For Your Own Good policy. The trouble, says Glasser, is that the outcomes are not the good that is intended. Quite the contrary: “The basic flaw of criticism, therefore, is not that it isn’t well intended, but that its intentions are almost never realized.”⁴

Glasser gives us a vivid account of the untoward consequences of being criticized:

When we are criticized, the sudden huge difference occurring [in the brain]...makes it feel as if the whole brain is exploding in pure pain. ...Nothing we encounter leads to a greater and quicker loss of control than to be criticized. And, equally, it is harder to regain control when we are criticized than in any other situation.

In my opinion, it is by far the single most destructive behavior we use as we attempt to control our lives.⁵

His conclusion is not surprising: “we can avoid a lot of misery if we don’t criticize.... Criticism is a luxury I believe none of us can afford.”⁶

Something very close to Glasser’s Never Criticize position has emerged in recent years in the women’s movement. An arena where this has been played out has been in the reviewing of women’s writings by other women. One forum for discussion has been *The Women’s Review of Books*, where authors of critical reviews have, at times, been passionately attacked for their criticism of women’s work. The central contention seems to be that in a culture where women’s writings have so often been denigrated and trivialized, we should be careful not to treat each other in this same way, but should instead provide support and appreciation.

Suzette Elgin takes up this issue when she responds to complaints about negative reviews of women writers: “when a woman who is distressed by a review complains, she gets support and sympathy

from other women — and I understand why.”⁷ But Elgin goes on to observe that this creates a number of problems, not the least of which is the question of women’s own learning. Elgin raises the specter of neglect and argues that this situation “literally holds back the progress of women writers...it makes reviews of their work less likely.”⁸ And she returns us to the educational question again:

How are women ever supposed to *learn*? If they can write inferior work and receive excellent reviews from other women — all the while dismissing negative reviews by men as irrelevant because they are sexist — how are they ever to learn that they can and must do better? I don’t know the answer.⁹

This recognition of an ongoing educational imperative brings us to our third alternative, which is an effort to do justice to the concerns and insights, as well as to remedy the shortcomings, of the first two approaches.

DO BOTH BUT KEEP THEM SEPARATE

If we take educational criticism to include honest candid feedback with accurate information on how well one is doing with respect to certain standards or criteria, and if we take educational nurturance to include support, care and encouragement for the person of the student, then it would seem that both of these are pedagogically desirable although incompatible, or at least in serious tension, when found together at close quarters, being attempted by one person.

So why not keep both these activities but make them clearly separate? For example we already do have certain common educational practices such as those of external examinations, “standardized tests,” and external examiners, wherein the teacher supports, coaches, and nurtures the students as they prepare together for the “external critic,” often in the form of an examination. In fact just such an explicit separation is recommended by the authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* as a particularly appropriate method for problems women students encounter in the tensions between nurturance and criticism.¹⁰

Such a separation not only seems plausible, it also fits our existing genderized expectations — indeed, it can fit all too well, dangerously so, by perpetuating genderized stereotypes. For example, when a Canadian researcher, Aniko Varpolatti interviewed a group of adolescent girls training to be coaches about their vision of the ideal coach, one striking reply was that the ideal coach would be two persons: one woman and one man — the woman coach would be supportive, encouraging, helpful, there to care for them if they were injured; the male coach would challenge them, push them, make them work hard and keep trying to do better.¹¹ And suddenly we are back in the world of separate spheres, one construed as “masculine” and the other as “feminine.”

The perpetuation of genderized stereotypes is not the only danger with this division of labor. Such a division also lends itself to a misleading, if not disempowering, epistemology — a view of knowledge and truth as “out there” somewhere, having an independent existence of its own, rather than recognizing that knowing and the known are bound up together in an ongoing process of human inquiry done by persons like ourselves. If one task of education is to increase our understanding, skills and capabilities for participation in a Community of Inquirers, then membership, at least on the level of a practicing novice, needs to be readily available to students as well as to their teachers, and should neither be perceived nor held as the exclusive property of “external examiners.”¹²

DO BOTH TOGETHER — BUT HOW?

If we reject the conflation of nurturance and criticism, the Never Criticize position, and the separatist answer as all three inadequate solutions, we will have come almost full circle back to our initial tension and Kathryn Morgan’s “Paradox.” At this point it is worth reminding ourselves that Morgan sets her paradox within the context of feminist pedagogy and of an ethics of care, for it is here that

this tension which runs throughout contemporary education is brought into full relief and highlighted. It is here that the latent and often tacit expectations for nurturance become explicit demands, while at the same time the destructive effects of criticism are also expressed outright and laid bare, enumerated, and taken as a cause for serious concern, so much so that the Never Criticize position is sometimes perceived as a viable alternative, while the option to relegate nurturance to some other non-pedagogical domain is not entertained, even though such a move is one version of a traditional educational stance.

Just as the context of feminist pedagogy presses the paradox upon us in its most unrelenting form, so also, I believe, this same context gives us the elements for generating new possibilities. To answer the How question I believe we must turn to some of the basic presuppositions in feminist pedagogy, along with key tenets from an ethics of care. In the first place we can make use of the strong emphasis on a relational ontology — the recurrent insistence on the observation that we are relational beings — we are born and raised enmeshed in a network of relationships, our existence, survival, and well-being are all irrevocably interconnected.

Once we turn attention to our relational connections with each other, we are in a position to make two closely related ethical shifts: (1) we remember to give an explicit non-subordinate place to the work of nurturance itself: we insist that relational tasks carry primary value in and of themselves, that they do not get relegated to the status of mere instrumental necessities, or ways to “improve working conditions,” done only in order to enable pursuit of other non-relational endeavors. (2) We provide support for each other as persons, as ends-in-ourselves who are more than (not co-extensive with) ourselves as learners, students, teachers, bearers of knowledge, ignorance, or expertise. In sum, a full-fledged, non-subordinate status is restored to, or bestowed upon, both the work of nurturance and the status of persons as more than, and not reducible to, the purposes and practices of teaching and learning. One might say that we insist upon an educator’s imperative: “One should always treat students as persons who are ends-in-themselves and not merely as means to their own learning.”

At first glance these “ethical shifts” may seem only to strengthen the case for nurturance and to leave criticism in an even more problematic spot than before; one may wonder whether we have returned to the Never Criticize position by a circuitous route. But there are two more important shifts yet to be made here — an epistemological shift, and a pedagogical one.

Our epistemological and pedagogical shifts are accurately reflected in Kathryn Morgan’s outline of “A Feminist Educational Model”:

Successful pedagogy involves creating educational experiences which foster the collective development of girls’ and women’s awareness of themselves as legitimate and critical participants in the creation of human knowledge. This sense of self is based on women experiencing the legitimacy of their own experience as relevant both to their own education and the education of others.¹³

Morgan’s articulation of these aims for girls and women should remind us that we want just such awareness, legitimacy, and critical participation for all our students.

Notice that once we start to pay serious attention to our relational interdependence and to the ways in which we learn from each other, the uni-directional focus on the teacher-student relationship can become multi-directional; the classroom scene turns into a complex sociogram with lines going every which way from student to student to teacher back to groups of students, etc. And, yes, we may have a “community”. But that’s not enough just to say “community” because our issue is still: what sort of community is this?

A JOINTLY CONSTITUTED COMMUNITY

So our question has become: How is this educational community to be constituted? Here is where our conjunction of both nurturance and criticism should not be lost. This community must, therefore, be jointly constituted as both: (1) A Community of Support; and (2) A Community of Inquiry.

To be constituted as a “community of support” a group must provide a “safe space” where members can come together as persons who care about each other as people, “without masks, pretenses, [or] badges of office.”¹⁴ All members assume some responsibility (not equal responsibility) for mutual well-being.

My concept of “communities of inquiry” follows from William James’ premise that “the truth is too great for any one actual mind...to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in.”¹⁵ Every participant acts as a “cognizer” who brings their own partial perspective to bear on the common inquiries of the group.

Inevitably some persons will be more able, experienced and skillful members. In educational settings asymmetry not only flows from the institutional structures themselves (e.g., the power of the teacher as the constituted authority, the giver of grades, the arbiter of pass or fail), but also arises out of differing degrees of knowledge, expertise, command over the tools, ability of articulation, acquaintance with the relevant “canons,” etc. Still, lines of asymmetry are fluid and territorial, not absolute. Just as no one person possesses the whole of truth, neither is anyone the bearer of absolute ignorance. Both knowledge and ignorance are questions of degree and of territory, not matters of absoluteness.

HAVE WE RESOLVED THE PARADOX?

It’s time to ask the question whether these “jointly constituted” communities can resolve the paradox, or at least ameliorate the difficulties we encountered with our three proposed solutions. We saw that criticism not only often fails to accomplish its well intentioned aims, but is also frequently miseducative in its effects, while nurturance without criticism is generally non-educative. And the attempt to do each separately, for educational purposes, can be misleading and disempowering. What happens when we shift to a jointly constituted community of support and inquiry, to an explicitly relational community where criticism and nurturance are practiced by everyone? Within this expanded context of an interdependent community, I believe we can bring these two activities, nurturance and criticism, together in such a way that each can enhance, as well as correct for, the other.

First, because the community practices and values support for students as persons, who are cared for and appreciated as constitutive members, students can be given a ground of personal worth apart from, and separable from, their achievements, or shortcomings, as academic learners. This may help us to short-circuit tendencies toward a confused merger of being and doing in which self-worth becomes based on performance, and mistakes become indicators for flaws or deficiencies in one’s very being as a person. When criticism is not experienced as undermining one’s whole sense of self, we open up the possibility for “hearing” criticism without being personally devastated by it, which then means one is more likely to be able to acknowledge mistakes and thereby learn from them.

In the second place, criticism can be transformed into mutual helping activities when done among students themselves as peers within a “community of inquiry.” By participating together in trial and error procedures, making corrections along the way, and learning from each other, students can experience criticism as an inherent part of their own progress, as ways to accomplish group ends, to become better players in the game of inquiry, or to pursue their own learning.

Another advantage is that the sources of critique are now multiple, numerous, more mutual, less asymmetrical, less imperious and less threatening than when they come from an authoritative teacher or professor. A critical question or suggestive critique from a peer can be handled in a “take it or leave it” manner. Corrections from peers are easier to challenge, and easier to reject; they are

thus easier to accept. They are also less likely to cause what Glasser so aptly describes as an “explosion in the brain.”

What does this mean for teachers? Teachers’ responsibilities are not diminished, but they are altered. Teachers are no longer the sole source of either nurturance or criticism. Teachers still provide initial conditions and a sense of direction, as well as continuing to work with students (and other teachers) in order to negotiate purposes and procedures. With respect to criticism, teachers are more likely to serve as “last resort” resources, the experts who are turned to when students have taken their work as far as they can go with each other. By the time this point is reached the critiques and corrections can sometimes be directed to the group rather than to single individuals. The larger task for teachers becomes the sophisticated orchestration of a community of support and inquiry.¹⁶

Finally, if we are to succeed, we must make the tasks of support and nurturance themselves the subject of inquiry. To nurture well, to care wisely depend upon inquiry, study, investigation, and yes, critique and criticism. Thus the work of nurturance brings us back around again to criticism. But in the last analysis, I believe it is only this larger framework of participation in a community of both support and inquiry that allows for, indeed creates, the enabling conditions for a true rapprochement between nurturance and criticism.¹⁷

¹ Kathryn Morgan, “The Perils and Paradoxes of Feminist Pedagogy,” *Resources for Feminist Research, Women and Philosophy* (Special Issue) 16, no. 3 (1987): 50.

² Morgan, “The Perils and Paradoxes,” 50.

³ Morgan, “The Perils and Paradoxes,” 50.

⁴ William Glasser, *Control Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 166.

⁵ Glasser, 163.

⁶ Glasser, 163-64. Glasser does make two further distinctions in his anti-criticism discussion. He acknowledges the importance of an acknowledged teaching relationship and he differentiates between working with children under the ages of twelve or thirteen in contrast to those who are older. But he still eschews using any criticism per se. He observes that young children “know they need guidance, and they are not yet engaged in the power struggle that they will join shortly. All I need to do is tell or show them a better way and pay little attention to what they had been doing that was wrong. I can also use this constructive approach with adults if they view me as a teacher or are not in competition with me.” (165)

⁷ Suzette Haden Elgin, “Damned If We Do...” *The Women’s Review of Books* 6, no. 8 (May 1987), 15.

⁸ Elgin, 15.

⁹ Elgin, 15.

¹⁰ Mary Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

¹¹ Aniko Varpolatti, Personal communication (London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario).

¹² To argue against using a strict separation of tasks, persons, and spheres here should not be confused with a rejection of all forms of separation — such as alternating times for creation and discovery, on the one hand, and for correction and justification on the other hand, or making use of the standard distinctions between “formative” and “summative” evaluations. And there is much to be said in favor of teachers and students working together to prepare for something — a sporting event, an art exhibit, a science fair, a play production, a concert, etc. — “public” or “external” to them all. But we cannot rely solely upon such external measures to resolve or reconcile all the issues surrounding pedagogical criticism.

¹³ Kathryn Morgan, unpublished paper.

¹⁴ Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 16-17.

¹⁵ William James, *Talks To Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Norton, 1899/1958), 19.

¹⁶ For two recent examples that envision schooling along lines similar to those I've been advocating and also give inspiring detailed accounts of the possibilities, see Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Nel Noddings *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).

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