

“But That Is Not What I Mean”
 Criticizing With Care *and* Respect

Barbara Applebaum
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Two excellent papers presented to the 1993 annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society revived a crucial and challenging question for educators who prize the values associated with nurturance, on the one hand, and serious inquiry and high standards of knowledge, on the other: what can criticism mean and how can it be implemented without abrogating commitments to nurturance? The first paper by Ann Diller¹ poignantly describes the paradox and examines three attempts to avoid it — the “For Your Own Good” model, the “Never Criticize” model and the “Separationist” model. Diller demonstrates that each approach inadequately deals with the problem and argues that there can be a rapprochement between criticism and nurturance if classrooms become “Communities of Support and Inquiry.” Within such communities, students develop bonds of caring so that criticism is transformed into something constructive and is not perceived as a personal attack.

In the second paper, Dwight Boyd² responds to Diller revealing an important ambiguity in her comprehension of “educational criticism.” Boyd perceptively distinguishes between two modes of educational criticism — the positive and the negative. While the negative mode focuses on making demands, holding students to standards, and pointing out inconsistencies (what Boyd refers to as the “finding fault” sense), the positive mode of educational criticism concentrates on promoting serious inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, and is identified by its concern for the positive enhancement of the skills necessary for learning. As Boyd notes, “acknowledging good moves in an argument and confirming why they are good pays homage to the same standards as pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions.”³ By exclusively defining educational criticism in the negative sense, Boyd argues, Diller fails to attend to the positive aspects of criticism, and unnecessarily intensifies the paradox.

Moreover, Boyd underscores that there is a psychological aspect to criticism in that each individual interprets criticism differently. While some may be devastated by it, others may thrive on it. The teacher must pay close attention to the different psychological factors or make-up of each student, Boyd maintains, and on that basis, decide whether or not positive or negative criticism would be educational.

Diller and Boyd should be commended for giving this important and complex educational issue the attention it deserves. Moreover, their efforts to resolve the conflict between the value of nurturance and standards of excellence in educational criticism have practical implications which educators will find very useful. Their respective suggestions concerning criticizing with care, however, are restricted to particular educational venues. What about educational criticism where a “Community of Support and Inquiry” cannot be developed and where it is impractical to expect a teacher to know his/her students individually? For example, in large lecture

halls, a professor may teach a multitude of students and the teacher/student interchange is drastically reduced, although not completely absent. Educational criticism may still have a role to play in such settings, although it is impossible to expect the teacher to know each and every one of his/her students on a personal level. Similarly, teaching assistants must often grade essays without knowing the students they are grading. In both these cases, educational criticism is important, and yet it is impractical to get to know individual students, and it is unrealistic to believe that a “Community of Support and Inquiry” can be developed.

My primary interest, however, in the notions of criticism and nurturance as pedagogical aspirations derives from my concern with what I maintain is an essential aspect of anti-racist education — the raising of white awareness, or helping dominant group members recognize their dominance. In particular, I am troubled by the rebuke and fault-finding manner which some anti-racist educators and facilitators employ to promote this awareness, and I am especially distressed when such education is ineffectual because it engenders anger and resistance. Indeed, raising awareness of dominance requires a certain type of criticism in that it calls for dominant group members to face their own role in the perpetuation of social inequality. If our goal, however, is to educate them and not merely to indoctrinate them for political correctness, what Diller and Boyd have to say about critiquing with care may have profound significance.

A brief inquiry into the meaning of “dominance” will reveal why educating for its recognition necessitates criticism of the most visceral kind. Etymologically, “dominance” involves ruling, governing, or being master, and is traditionally associated with having power or force of either/or both the physical and material sort. Thus, “dominance” implies, and is inherently based upon, an asymmetry of power relations. When “dominance,” however, is solely or predominantly perceived as an issue of physical or material strength, the more subtle forms of domination, subordination, oppression, and exclusion may be obscured. Systemic oppression taking the form of unquestioned, deeply-held norms and standards, which are assumed universal and are embedded in our society, subordinate, silence and exclude many groups of people whose own norms and standards may differ radically. While those who are subordinated do not need to be convinced of the subtle injustices in our society, those fortunate to be members of the dominant group may be blind to them.

One way of explaining “dominance” which I found to mitigate the sense of being assaulted and attacked is by means of the notion of “privilege.” Understanding dominance in terms of privilege has the advantage of helping dominant group members initially confront their dominance in a positive rather than a “fault-finding” way. The notion of “privilege” is useful because it not only underscores certain advantages, rights, or benefits that accrue to certain groups of people in society, but also points to the “taken for grantedness” of such assumed entitlements. Rather than castigate dominant group members in a negative fashion, it reveals to them the rights and benefits that they enjoy and take for granted, but which other people are unjustly denied. Peggy McIntosh,⁴ self-reflecting on what being “white”

grants her in Western society, employs the notion of privilege to acknowledge the benefits that her white skin procures. Such benefits, an “invisible knapsack of privileges,” manifest themselves in every area of our daily lives, whether we can live where we choose, whether we can find food we are accustomed to eating, whether we are perceived as trustworthy financial agents, etc. Since these are benefits which white skin people take for granted and implicitly feel they deserve, argues McIntosh, it is easy to fail to notice that not everyone, through no fault of his/her own, has access to them.

Furthermore, the privileges that the dominant enjoy are not necessarily exhibited only in material benefits, but are also revealed in the norms that shape the dominant group member’s entire perception of reality.⁵ Dominant norms and standards implicitly mold everything people come to understand about the world — what is knowledge, what is progress, what is truth, and what is right and wrong. The unspoken norms, often perceived as universal truths, may not be universal and may oppress, subordinate, and silence the voices of others.

To educate the dominant towards an awareness of their dominance, therefore, necessitates a type of criticism of the most personal and potentially devastating kind. It challenges the dominant to question what they know to be true, what they know to be right, and what they have come to enjoy as rightfully theirs. It calls for self-reflection of a most serious kind and an appreciation of advantages that are often taken for granted. For professional educators who are dominant group members, the scholarship on dominance is particularly threatening and questions our cherished sense of academic self — our intelligence, our fair-mindedness, our knowledgeability, and our ability to be alert to political influences.⁶ Consequently, the issue that both Diller and Boyd grapple with, criticizing with care, has considerable bearing on how this educational aim is best achieved.

As Boyd’s paper aims to build, elaborate, and enrich Diller’s work, the aim of my analysis is to extend, but also to put sharper outlines on what Diller and Boyd have already contributed to the topic. By abstracting the insights of both authors, and also by pointing to the limitations of their recommendations, I suggest a more fundamental type of educational criticism which is applicable to educational situations in which a “Community of Support and Inquiry” is not possible and in which it is not possible to know the psycho-pedagogical history of each student. Furthermore, and more significant for me, the type of caring criticism which I am recommending reveals and highlights pedagogical assumptions and attitudes which are necessary for the successful development of awareness of dominance.

Since Diller, following Morgan, describes the conflict between educational criticism and nurturance as a paradox, it would seem that what we have here is not only tension resulting from empirical factors, but, more significantly, a conceptual incompatibility. Thus, as Boyd suggests, there is a need to clarify both sides of the paradox. In what follows, the meaning of educational criticism, and then the meaning of nurturance, will be analyzed. A model of criticism based on these analyses, and which is claimed to be essential and broadly applicable to the educational realm, will be delineated.

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM?

As Boyd notes, Diller's understanding of "educational criticism" must be extrapolated from the many things she says about it. From Diller's reference to Morgan, we understand that criticism is associated with "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."⁷ Educational criticism is also described when Diller discusses the "For Your Own Good" model. According to this view, educational criticism involves "expect(ing), demand(ing), requir(ing), and teach(ing) adherence to certain *standards of behavior*."⁸ While Diller rejects this model of criticism, it is clear that what she repudiates is not the definition of criticism that it assumes; but rather, a particular effect that it generates — that criticism is not perceived to be nurturing by those who are criticized. Specifically, what is not rejected is the notion that *criticism involves standards and norms*. Moreover, that Diller admonishes the "Never Criticize" approach for relinquishing these standards, thereby forfeiting fertile opportunities for intellectual growth and stimulation, demonstrates Diller's devotion to the standards that criticism implies.

It is the assumed norms and standards by which behavior and output are evaluated which differentiates criticism from mere disagreement. While disagreement is defined as differing in opinion, or to be at variance with, the definition of criticism involves making a judgment and implies that one way is right and another is wrong. Contrasting educational criticism with criticism in interpersonal relations highlights this point. It may be easy to conflate disagreement and criticism regarding interpersonal relationships because standards for evaluating right from wrong in those situations may often be nebulous. As long as there are aims in education, however, standards will clearly be implied in educational criticism.

Regarding the implied standards underlying educational criticism, Boyd's reference to the negative or "fault finding" type of criticism is instructive because it hints at a distinction often overlooked. Such criticism accents *deficiencies* based upon standards or norms. What is significant, however, is that the devastating effects of the "fault finding" type of criticism can be partially attributed to the fact that "fault" is often used ambiguously, either as pointing to an epistemological inadequacy or to a defect in character. Boyd's analysis, and the importance of what he calls positive criticism, must be taken further. I propose that there are two aspects of educational criticism which are often conflated but which, when theoretically distinguished, potentially resolve the paradox of the "bearded mother." These two aspects of educational criticism can be referred to as the *epistemological* and the *psychological*, and are identified with the content and the form, or the "what" and the "how" regarding criticism. The epistemological aspect of educational criticism involves the conscientious application of standards and norms to the student's behavior and attainments, and thereby evaluates his/her achievements and accomplishments. Yet criticism is not only stringent assessment and appraisal; if it were, it would always be disapproving and condemning. Criticism is transmitted in a medium which constitutes its psychological aspect. Thus, criticism can be conveyed

in a negative or a positive *manner*. The positive manner, however, is not limited to being “positive” in the sense that Boyd illuminates — positive in that it points out the positive rather than the negative. Positive criticism can also be “positive” because *it respects the person who is being criticized*. Such criticism not only conveys a message of evaluation, but also, and seemingly paradoxically, conveys a message to the one criticized that s/he is also respected. In order to clarify how respect is an essential aspect of criticism, however, it is important to return to the other side of the paradox and get a closer look at what nurturance requires.

WHAT IS NURTURANCE?

Diller employs the concept of care to represent the nurturing side of the conflict. Indeed, she uses the terms care and nurturance interchangeably and is supported in this by Morgan. Teachers, especially if they are women, are often expected “to be nurturant, to be supportive, to respond to students’ legitimate needs for growth and reassurance...to implement an ‘ethics of care,’ to be available to listen, to offer counsel, and to give support and encouragement.”⁹ Diller’s focus on care and nurturance leads her to highlight the relational aspect of criticizing with care,¹⁰ and inclines her to propose a “Community of Support and Inquiry” which, I have claimed, cannot be applied to all educational settings. Diller’s significant insight about the relational aspect of criticizing with care, however, need not only lead to this latter proposal, it can also lead to the notion of respect.

The concepts of care and respect have often been considered incompatible primarily because the former concept depends on a self-other relational ontology which the latter concept is perceived to reject. Kant, for example, has been understood to perceive caring as a type of love which is founded upon a contextual understanding of personhood. Love requires that persons come nearer to each other and is antithetical to a conception of self and other which remains distinct and independent. Thus, for Kant, care and respect are incompatible. Based on the recent inroads made by feminist ethics, Robin Dillon¹¹ introduces a type of caring that can be seen as a type of respect.

Dillon shows that care and respect are not necessarily mutually exclusive by making a number of observations about the concept of respect. To respect someone (originally from the Latin “*respicere*” meaning “to look back at” or “to look again”) means to pay careful attention to him/her and to take him/her seriously. This implies that the object of respect is worth taking into consideration. Respect is a kind of valuing and cherishing of the object. In other words, when we respect someone, there is a reason why s/he deserves our respect. Respect is grounded. There are different reasons which justify our respecting someone and thus, there are different types of respect. Employing a distinction introduced by Stephen Darwall¹² and Stephen Hudson,¹³ Dillon distinguishes between evaluative/appraisal respect and recognition respect. This distinction is important because it differentiates between respect which is grounded and not grounded in particularity, and thus, respect which is not due all persons equally and that which is.

Evaluative/appraisal respect is given to someone because the particular characteristics or skills which s/he possesses are considered valuable and because the

acquisition of such skills are a result of one's own efforts. Such respect, of course, is not due all persons. One may respect Carl Lewis but not Ben Johnson, not only because one values being able to run a 100 meters in less than 10 seconds, but also because one values this accomplishment only if it is achieved without the help of drugs.

Recognition respect, in contrast, is not evaluative in the sense that such respect needs to be dependent upon the valuable characteristics and traits of particular persons; rather, it consists of a type of valuing, acknowledging, or affirming that is due to all persons regardless of personal merit or excellence. Respect in this sense is grounded in the inherent worth of personhood and recognizes that the fact that someone is a person constrains our actions in particular ways.

Recognition respect is a fundamental aspect, according to Dillon, of care-respect. Not only must we recognize other persons as persons and give that weight in our action deliberations, but we must actively promote the other's good. Yet while care-respect is not grounded in particularity in that (like recognition respect) it is due all persons, it requires particularity to be implemented. In order to promote the other's good, one must know the other's personal goals and ends. Therefore, care-respect demands that one get to know the other person enough to be able to imagine the world as s/he sees it.

Since the object of care-respect is the particular individual, it would not be a suitable concept to apply to our problem of educational criticism, which, as we have seen, needs to include relatively impersonal educational situations. Yet the notion of care-respect offers insights that help reconcile educational criticism with nurturance. In particular, care-respect highlights the importance and implications of recognizing persons as persons. It demands that we take into consideration the viewpoint of the other person and try to promote their good. Care-respect can be slightly modified so that it can be applied in relatively impersonal situations. Rather than demand that we get to know the particular interests and goals of an individual, it may just require that we try not to degrade and to contribute positively to the other's state of being. Such care-respect would not need, for implementation, the knowledge of the particular individual's interests. It is my contention that such a notion of care is an indispensable component of educational criticism, and that when we understand educational criticism in this way, the paradox of the "bearded mother" diminishes considerably, if not altogether.

The proposed understanding of educational criticism requires that we take care not to hurt the individual one is criticizing because s/he is a person worthy of our respect. Yet because that individual is worthy of our respect, we should not withhold epistemological correction and thereby, possibly impede his/her intellectual growth. Such criticism refuses to forego the epistemological value of acknowledging error, yet it does so in a manner that does not harm the self-esteem of the individual. It is gentle and constructive criticism which takes all precautions to avoid devastating both the self-esteem of the one criticized, and the relationship between the one criticizing and the one criticized. To distinguish this from Dillon's notion of care-respect, I refer to such educational criticism as criticizing with care *and* respect.

In fact, it does not appear that either Diller or Boyd would disagree with this understanding of criticizing with care and respect. Diller makes reference to respect towards the end of her paper when she calls our attention to the educator's imperative, "One should always treat students as persons who are ends-in-themselves and not merely as means to their own learning."¹⁴ Respect, in Diller's argument, remains more of a background condition of all teacher-student relations and thus, its significance to educational criticism is diluted. Moreover, it is not enough that the teacher treat students with respect, the teacher must take pains to make sure that this message of respect is conveyed to the student. There must be a display of respect, especially when criticism is to follow.

Boyd seems also to acknowledge this understanding of criticism, although it may not be articulated in his paper. When Boyd speaks about "positive" criticism, I am reminded of a comic strip in which Beetle Bailey is complaining about the horrible food being served by Cookie, the army chef. "Let's go tell him off," says Beetle. But another soldier admonishes, "Wait guys, remember the chaplain's advice... 'Always find something good to say.'" And then you see the chaplain going over to Cookie remarking, "GOOD GARBAGE!" But this is not what Boyd means by "positive" criticism.

As a matter of fact, one need go no farther than the introduction of Boyd's article to illustrate what he means by "positive" criticism. Note how he sets up his critical response, especially the sensitive respect with which he qualifies his criticism:

What is wrong here is not something to be laid at the feet of the people involved...but something that is inherent in the issue itself that Diller is struggling with.... I chose to respond to this paper because I could confidently predict that whatever Ann would say about the issue would help me in my own thinking about it.¹⁵

Boyd shows confidence in, and support of, Diller's efforts and capabilities, recognizes certain artificial constraints which restrict a full account on so complex a topic, and aims to enrich, not tear apart, Diller's analysis. Boyd not only uses positive rather than negative criticism, but illustrates that what is constructive about positive criticism is that it also conveys a message of respect.

Criticizing with care and respect requires that one initially trust one's students, respect their views, and use care and sensitivity in trying to correct and change them. This does not imply that a teacher abrogate his/her expertise in terms of knowledge, nor does respect require "feigned" agreement. Respect, however, also does not assume that the one criticizing has the final say. Criticizing with care and respect suggests the possibility that both the one criticized and the one criticizing have much to learn. Its aim is the expansion of knowledge — and both the criticizer and the one criticized may have what it takes to contribute.

If criticism involves evaluative judgments implying right and wrong as emphasized in the first part of this paper, how can it be that both the one criticized and the one criticizing have much to contribute? Indeed, while criticizing implies standards and norms, criticizing with care and respect presupposes that this evaluative position is open to review upon hearing another's viewpoint, and even open to change when appropriate.

One example of an educational situation in which criticizing with care and respect is sorely needed is in undergraduate philosophy courses, a domain traditionally dominated by the “adversary method.”¹⁶ In my undergraduate years, absolute accuracy with one’s words and logic were the primary demand. To strive for linguistic clarity and logical coherence are indubitable values. Yet I found that any logical or linguistic slip on my part or on the part of my fellow students called forth harsh and sometimes uncharitable criticism — criticism which often silenced students and resulted in good ideas not being developed. And when I was criticized, I learned that the retort, “but that is not what I mean,” was considered moronic and not worth a response. Instead of this inviting a request to better clarify what I meant, my critic would contribute to the perpetuation of my confused state. Criticizing with care and respect, in contrast, aims at constructively helping the one criticized to clarify what s/he really means, and only then attempts to add, change, and build upon those ideas.

What are the implications of criticizing with care and respect for the teaching of awareness of dominance? Space restrictions allow me to only briefly comment on this topic. First of all, care requires that such awareness may need to be developed in stages. This is often overlooked when individuals are labeled “racist” as if that will bring something of educational importance to their attention. Since “You are racist” is a normative accusation, it is rarely perceived as a descriptive explanation for one’s contributing to the perpetuation of injustice and thus, is rejected and resisted. It seems more promising to first discuss “dominance” in a more general sense, working slowly to show how one’s own compliance with, and fear of, challenging dominant norms and standards perpetuate the status quo. Moreover, care requires that guilt be used judiciously or not at all. Encouraging discomfort, not guilt, may have better educational efficacy. Respecting the one being criticized in the case of the dominant group member also requires that one does not immediately vilify his/her professed intentions, and that one does not completely cut his/her voice out of intercultural dialogue. The dominant group member may have to learn when to speak so that others who have been previously silenced can be heard, but care must be taken that all he/she has to say is not completely jettisoned. Furthermore, criticizing with care and respect implies that the one who already understands the dimension of dominance has no reason to act sanctimoniously. Finally, criticizing with care and respect has the potential to minimize resistance to, and to promote the understanding of, dominance.

In conclusion, criticizing with care and respect does justice both to the value of serious inquiry and the value of nurturance. It is the type of criticism which can and should be employed in all educational settings. The actual difficulty of implementing this type of criticism, however, must not be dismissed. Further inquiry into this issue is vital and various questions deserve particular attention. First of all, the relationship between honesty and such criticism requires scrutiny — does criticizing with care and respect ever require us to be dishonest? Another question focuses on the issue of epistemological criticism and the degree of openness that such care and respect requires: How open can we be and where do we draw the line? This issue is especially dangerous for women who may be pressured by the desire to criticize with

care and respect, and to question, moreover to doubt, their own standards and norms and their own sense of intellectual authority. Finally, it may be important to understand that resistance to criticism does not necessarily imply that one has failed to criticize with care and respect. Resistance may be a natural, albeit temporary, response to criticism which will be followed by reflection in which the criticism is accepted and understood.

This paper is not meant to be the final word on the topic but only hopes to have contributed to keeping the discussion around this important and complicated issue alive. What I hoped to have shown is the value of criticizing with care and respect. If a teacher does educational criticism with care and respect, this is in itself a great educational lesson.

1. Ann Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).

2. Dwight Boyd, "Criticizing with Care: Response to Diller," in Thompson, ed. *Philosophy of Education 1993*.

3. *Ibid.*, 248.

4. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* (July/August 1989): 10-12.

5. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

6. Peggy McIntosh, "Warning: The New Scholarship on Women May Be Hazardous to Your Ego," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 29-31.

7. Kathryn Morgan, "The Perils and Paradoxes of Feminist Pedagogy," 50, as quoted in Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" 238.

8. Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" 239 (underlining mine).

9. Morgan as quoted in Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" 238.

10. Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" 241.

11. Robin Dillon, "Care and Respect," in *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. E. Browning Cole and S. Coultrap McQuin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 69-81.

12. Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88 (October 1977): 36-49.

13. Stephen Hudson, "The Nature of Respect," *Social Theory and Practice* 6 (Spring 1980): 69-90.

14. Diller, "Can We Reach a Rapprochement Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" 242.

15. Boyd, "Criticizing with Care," 246-47.

16. Janice Moulton, "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merril B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), 149-64.