

## “Critical thinking in Older Adult Education: The Contribution of Aesthetic Experience”<sup>1</sup>

Alexis Kokkos

### Introduction

The following paper is based on two assumptions. The first is that the skill of critical thinking is necessary for seniors. They often shape their meaning perspectives by adopting stereotypes and myths which don't allow them to perceive situations of their personal and social life clearly. For instance, regarding educational inequalities, many dropouts assume that they themselves are responsible for their failure in school, and believe that they didn't have the will or the abilities to meet the demands of the educational system. They disregard that the stated will and abilities are related to their cultural capital and habitus which are determined by their social environment (Bourdieu, 1970, 1984). Therefore, it is necessary for older adults to familiarize with the critical way of thinking in order to be able to challenge the stereotypical, problematic ideas and to perceive the origins, the present situation, but also the potentials of the way they interpret their experience in an emancipatory way.

The second assumption is that the exploration of works of art is one of the main ways that lead to the empowerment of critical thinking. Our contact with art (aesthetic experience) may provide us with thoughts and insights that are distinct from the dominant ones and allow us to perceive various issues beyond the way that is considered as given.

Based on these assumptions, the paper is structured as follows: First, I attempt to define the concept of critical thinking as a means to learners' emancipation. In the second part, I discuss the reasons why aesthetic experience is important concerning the reinforcement of learners' critical mode of thinking and I present the method “*Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience*”, which aims to embody the exploration of works of art in adult and older adult education in a way that facilitates

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critical consciousness and involves an active participation of learners. In the third part, I deal with crucial issues that have emerged during the implementation of the method in Greece as well as through the European Grundtvig Project *ARTiT*. Finally, I present the outcomes of an example of application which took place in a setting of older adult education.

### **The meaning of critical thinking**

In the international literature – and among teachers and adult educators as well – there is a prevailing assumption of what critical thinking is. Most of the main theorists of this field, such as Ennis (1996), Fisher (2001), Paul (1993), perceive critical thinking as a thorough intellectual process of checking and citing evidence. They mostly concentrate on the quality analysis of an idea or a situation. They emphasize on obeying the rules and the criteria of rationalism. Some scholars add the element of decision and action, where the reflection process should lead to. Let's approach some characteristic views.

Scriven and Paul (n.d) define critical thinking as follows: “*Critical thinking is the intellectual discipline process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, synthesizing and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, as a guide to belief and action*” (p.1). They consider (ibid) clarity, accuracy, consistency, thoroughness, comprehensiveness, impartiality etc. to be qualities of critical thinking. Ennis and Norris (1989) define critical thinking as “*a reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe or do*” (p. 3). In another paper, Ennis (1996, pp. 4-8) lists the components of critical thinking as: focusing on an issue or a problem, the correct investigation of the facts and arguments, clarity, exploration of the framework in which the reflection takes place (such as surrounding individuals, natural and social environment), documentation of conclusions.

However, these approaches limit the range of critical thinking to the dimension of complying with the appropriate cognitive rules. They do not seek to question the dysfunctional dimensions of the social norms and the dominant ideology.

In contrast to these approaches stands the critical theory of the School of Frankfurt. The core of its perspective consists of ethical and political assumptions. The starting point is that developed capitalistic societies are subject to strong social inequalities, bureaucratic systems and rigid institutions. Citizens usually live in alienating social, employment and interpersonal relationships and they are submerged in the habits of the consuming society. Consequently, they do not question the various dimensions of the status quo which they take for granted. This occurs because a wide range of institutions (education, media, advertising, products of mass culture etc.) infuse them with the dominant – marketplace – ideology, convincing them that the existing forms of social organization function in their favor, when often the opposite is true. Thus, citizens' common-sense understandings are not able to distinguish the forms of oppression and alienation that surround and infuse them.

Similar to these ideas are those of critical pedagogy, whose main figure is Paulo Freire (1970). The cornerstone of this approach is consciousness through critical thinking, which means that learners gain awareness of the social, cultural and political conditions that determine their lives, as well as the ability to re-evaluate them and form new perceptions, corresponding to their vital interests.

Brookfield (2005, 2012), defined the characteristics of the process of critical thinking by combining the ideas of the Frankfurt School, of Freire, as well as of Foucault and Gramsci. According to Brookfield (2012), a first stage is our effort “*to discover the assumptions that influence the way we think and act*” (p.11). During the second stage, we assess the validity, convincing evidence and reliability of these assumptions. Next, we explore the assumptions alternatively and try to see them from multiple and different perspectives. Then, we link our insights drawn from the previous stages with some form of ‘*informed action*’ (ibid, p.13), that is an action which is based on evidence and which may have the results we wish it to have. Finally, a crucial component of the process of critical thinking, which is evident in all the stated stages, is exploring the degree to which our assumptions are justifiable “*according to some notion of goodness or desirability*” (ibid, p.15).

I argue that Brookfield's synthetic approach explains convincingly that critical thinking is not reduced to analyzing information, but connects this process to values and commitments, which should orient the thinkers towards actions that should

concern them but also the common good. Moreover, I think that Brookfield's view about the conception and use of critical thinking is congruent to the ideas of the theorists of critical gerontology (i.e. Allman, 1984; Battersby & Glendenning, 1992; Moody, 1993; Formosa, 2000) who have claimed that it is not any type of education that empowers older people, but the education of emancipatory ideas and practices.

### **Transformative learning through aesthetic experience**

Several important scholars of pedagogy and art education (i.e. Dewey, 1934/1980; Gardner, 1990; Eisner, 2002; Efland, 2002) have stated that the infusion of aesthetic experience within the learning process could reinforce the creative and affective dimensions of learning. Moreover, the theorists of Frankfurt School, especially Adorno (1986), Horkheimer (1938/1984) and Marcuse (1978) claimed that the spiritual content and the structure of substantial works of art enclose a texture rarely found in the experiences of social reality, which are dominated by instrumental rationality and conformism. Therefore, the contact with this kind of works of art functions as a field where a critical mode of thinking is encouraged, confronting the taken for granted assumptions and offering criteria that help us release ourselves from the prevailing social norms.

Furthermore, the theorist of literature and researcher of the human brain Brian Boyd presented new arguments on the benefits of using art for the development of unconventional thinking. He claimed (Boyd, 2009) that contact with artistic creations facilitates the development of neuronal cells and the creation of cerebral synapses, that promote the ability to handle multileveled issues. According to Boyd, the diachronic human contact with great art, for instance with the Homeric epic poems, contributes decisively to the strengthening of empathy and the understanding of diversity, which were necessary for the evolution of the human race.

These ideas led me to suggest a method titled "*Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience*" (Kokkos, 2010, 2011), which aims to embody aesthetic experience in adult and older adult education in a way that develops critical consciousness and involves an active participation of learners. The method has been applied in several learning organizations in Greece, such as the Hellenic Open

University, Second Chance Schools, Enterprises and the Therapy Center for Dependent Individuals. It has also been applied in Denmark, Romania and Sweden through the European Grundtvig Project *ARTiT: Development of Innovative Methods of Training the Trainers*.

The method consists of *six stages*:

The *first stage* refers to the investigation by the educator regarding the need for critical exploration of some taken for granted, dysfunctional assumptions of the participants around an issue at hand.

At the *second stage* the educator facilitates a process through which the participants express their ideas on the issue.

At the *third stage* the educator, after studying the participants' views, negotiates with them about which sub-issues will be eventually put under exploration and in what order. They also negotiate critical questions through which the sub-issues could be discussed.

For example, in the context of the project *ARTiT* (2012) concerning the issue "Intercultural Relations", critical questions emerged which aimed to facilitate an approach of sub-issues, such as:

1. Why should we learn about other?
2. Is ours the best way?
3. Once a foreigner, always a foreigner?

At the *fourth stage* the educator, in cooperation with the learning group, identifies various pieces of all forms of art, which could serve as triggers for the elaboration of the critical questions. The meaning of each work of art might correlate to one or more critical questions. It is important to choose works of art that should spur critical and creative thinking.

For example, in order to investigate the above three critical questions several works of art have been chosen and related to them as it is demonstrated on the following Table.

Proposed works of art	Suggested connection to critical questions		
	1	2	3
<i>The Little Emperor</i> , Alec Ee (FA)	√	√	
<i>A Bedtime Story</i> , Mitsuye Yamada (L)	√	√	√
<i>A peaceful Life</i> , Oliver Jon (M)	√		√
<i>Kaos</i> , Paolo & Vittorio Taviani (F)	√		
<i>Entre Les Murs (The Class)</i> , Laurent Cantet (F)	√	√	√
<i>New Kids in the Neighborhood</i> , Norman Rockwell (FA)	√	√	√
<i>The Scarlet Thread</i> , Rachel Barton (L)	√	√	
(FA)=Fine Arts, (L)=Literature, (M)=Music, (F)=Film			

Here, three of these works of art are presented: The paintings *New Kids in the Neighborhood* by Norman Rockwell and *The Little Emperor*, by Alec Ee, as well as the poem *A Bedtime Story*, by Mitsuye Yamada.



New Kids in the Neighborhood



The Little Emperor

### A BEDTIME STORY

Once upon a time,  
 an old Japanese legend  
 goes as told  
 by Papa,  
 an old woman traveled through  
 many small villages  
 seeking refuge  
 for the night.

Each door opened  
 a sliver  
 in answer to her knock  
 then closed.

Unable to walk  
 any further  
 she wearily climbed a hill  
 found a clearing  
 and there lay down to rest  
 a few moments to catch  
 her breath.

The villagetown below  
 lay asleep except  
 for a few starlike lights.  
 Suddenly the clouds opened  
 and a full moon came into view  
 over the town.

The old woman sat up  
 turned toward  
 the village town  
 and in supplication  
 called out  
 Thank you people  
 of the village,  
 if it had not been for your  
 kindness

in refusing me a bed  
 for the night  
 these humble eyes would never  
 have seen this  
 memorable sight.

Papa paused, I waited.

In the comfort of our  
 Hill top home in Seattle  
 overlooking the valley,  
 I shouted

"That's the END?"

At the *fifth stage* the educator coordinates a process during which: First, a systematic exploration of one of the chosen works of art takes place. Then, the ideas which have been drawn are correlated through discourse to one or more critical questions. This process is repeated for a second, a third work of art and so on.

In order to facilitate the exploration of the works of art some sets of triggering questions that have been suggested by Perkins (1994, 2003) are used, such as: “What do you see/hear?”; “What do you think about that?”; “What did you see that made you say that?”; “What does it make you wonder about?”; “What questions or puzzles do you have?”; “What does this work of art make you want to explore?”.

From the ideas arising, the learning group finds reasons to expand the treatment of the various dimensions of each sub-issue.

Finally, during the *sixth stage* the emerged assumptions are compared to those expressed at the second stage. Furthermore, reflection on the whole experience takes place.

### **Crucial issues**

No matter what can be said about the implementation of the method, the educational act creates its own momentum and adult educators often ask crucial questions about the application practices. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to provide feedback on the three issues that caused the greatest concern.

The first one is: *What kind of works of art can unearth critical thinking? Can all of them, without exception, serve such a function?*

This is an especially complex issue. There is a general agreement of theorists (e.g. Broudy, 1987; Efland, 2002; Danto, 1981) that it is not possible for a universally accepted norm to exist, according to which one is obliged to agree on the importance of a work of art or on the impact it could have on our thoughts and feelings.

On the other hand, as already stated, the theorists of Frankfurt School, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have claimed that the substantial aesthetic experience could trigger the critical mode of thinking. Later on, a number of scholars who explore art-based learning have expressed relevant and convincing ideas (e.g. Perkins, 1994; Dirkx, 1997; Greene, 2000; Castoriadis, 2008). They claimed that, given that works of art with aesthetic value contain a wide range of interrelated components and meanings, are open to multiple interpretations and explore deeply and holistically the conditions of human existence, they offer the receiver the possibility to acquire a critical way of perceiving reality.

This approach of the first issue leads to the second one: *Is it possible for the vast majority of learners to have emotional and intellectual access to works of art of aesthetic value? Which of these could seem familiar to the learners who have been deprived of cultural capital?*

Freire's ideas on the matter are enlightening. He used sketches as triggers for the development of critical reflection on various social issues (Freire, 1970). He insisted that there should be a close connection between the content of each sketch and the level of perceptual capacity of the learners. For this reason, he used sketches of a representational texture which portrayed everyday life situations and could be comprehensible to the learners (Freire, 1971, 1998). However, these sketches were not conventional artistic products, but were painted by “*significant Brazilian artists*” (Freire, 1971, p. 114), with the evident intention to create a qualitative aesthetic experience which could lead to holistic and meaningful insights.

Also, there is a number of texts in the literature (e.g. Greene, 2000; Thompson, 2002; Perkins, 1994) which show that, if adult educators try thoroughly for the creation of a facilitating learning environment, it might be possible that learners who are not familiar with substantial art gain an emotional and intellectual access to its understanding. Similar ideas have been expressed concerning older adult education by Darrough (1992), Gibbons (1985) and Myers (1992).

Thus, based synthetically on the scholars' ideas that have been mentioned in this part, certain standards could be proposed relating to the selection of works of art in the context of emancipatory learning in a way that favors the participation of a wide range

of learners at the process: the works of art that are used should have aesthetic value but they might also be comprehensive to the participants.

I could state an example from a school of Second Chance, in Larisa, Greece (Kokkos and Associates, 2011). Initially, the participants considered that the contact with art concerns only experts or artists and is not connected to their lives. Thus the educator, while intending for them to gradually familiarize with the methodology of aesthetic experience, suggested to first elaborate works of popular art which are connected to their everyday experiences (tapestries, pottery, wood carvings). When they got used to appreciating this kind of art and they gained criteria to decipher its “codes”, she proposed to them to elaborate the issue “bright and grey side of life” through the elaboration of paintings of Caravaggio representing the strong and ill Bacchus. The attempt led to important learning outcomes.

The third issue is: *What if some learners only used the criteria they had adopted in the process of their socialization, and could not find the works of art that their educator proposes worth commenting and, instead, they suggest the use of conventional ones?* I argue that we can find a response within the work of Freire (1970) and Mezirow (2000). Both claim that an adult educator is not neutral. He/She respects the learners’ views, however should create opportunities for the strengthening of their critical mode of thinking. Practically, this means that in the case that the participants prefer – and suggest – works of art which incorporate conventional cultural codes, a discourse takes place between them and the educator, examining all the arguments and encouraging the expression of alternative ideas. The aim is to enable the greatest possible integrated approach concerning the reasoning of choosing and using each work of art. The educators support their views, but are open to the suggestions of the participants.

In the next part, I will present an example of application of the method. It took place in March 2013 at a Day Centre for the Elderly (KAPI), located at Aspropyrgos, forty kilometers away from Athens.

### **An example**

The learning group numbered 15 older adults (9 women and 6 men) 65-75 years of age, who had very few financial resources and a poor cultural background. They participated in a 30 hours learning circle, on the subject of family relationships.

During the first sessions, the educator gradually began to realize that many of the participants were involved in relationships of tension and conflict within their families. They expressed emotions of anger, sorrow, despair and guilt, while at the same time it seemed that they could not handle the situation and break free from a perpetual cycle of conflict, recrimination and estrangement. This insight led the educator to the conclusion that there was a need for critical investigation of the participants' dysfunctional assumptions on the issue. Thus, the *first stage* of the method's application had been applied. The educator believed it would be useful to apply the next five stages during the two following 2 hour sessions.

At the *second stage*, the educator asked the participants to express their points of view on the issue of conflict within the family. Most were reluctant to participate in the process. Others expressed opinions that demonstrated their difficulty to communicate with their relatives or their spouses in a creative way in order to reduce tension and to find new, alternative modes of co-existence which would be mutually accepted. For instance: "He (brother, uncle, etc.) wants to harm me"; "The only solution is to give in"; "We must never give in"; "The oldest should give in"; "The youngest should"; "I find it humiliating to apologize".

At the *third stage*, the educator considered thoughtfully all the points of view that were expressed and then proposed to the learning group to concentrate on two sub-issues corresponding to the following critical questions:

- a. What can the reasons of a conflict within the family be?
- b. If there is a conflict between the members of a family, how can it be dealt with?

The learning group agreed to discuss those questions during the next stages.

At the *fourth stage* the group looked for works of art that could be used as triggers to approach the critical questions. Through the discussion it became obvious that their

content would be difficult to be reached through fine art or music. Furthermore, the participants' familiarization with theatre, literature and dancing was weak or even absent; therefore they were not in a position to propose relevant artworks or to assess the corresponding suggestions of the educator. Thus, the quest for works of art was focused on films or TV-series. Some participants suggested a Turkish TV-series that is popular in Greece. The educator – being convinced that this product of mass culture could not contribute to unearthing a critical mode of thinking – suggested to the participants to deal with something new for them. He had in mind the film *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, by Sydney Pollack.

The film is about two brothers, who work together as stage pianists in various bars, hotels and nightclubs. The older brother is not as good a musician as the younger one, but he successfully manages their act. They reach a point where the younger disagrees with the organizational choices made by the older one, because he feels they insult him as an artist. They get into a vicious fight and they split up. After some time, the younger brother, after dealing with his existential issues, visits his brother at his home to make amends. For some time this doesn't seem easy, but he patiently insists, showing openness and manages to reconcile at the end... The learning group agreed to explore this film.

In the movie there are three scenes that could offer several triggers for reflection on the two critical questions, which had been identified: A scene which shows the different way the two brothers perceive professional life, another one that shows the fight – where their disagreements and differences are revealed – and the reconciliation scene.

Thus, at the *fifth stage*, first the three excerpts were shown, while the educator explained their connection to the rest of the film. A systematic elaboration of the three parts followed, through questions-triggers suggested by Perkins' technique (see previous part of this text). After that, the educator asked from the participants to connect the ideas that emerged from the exploration of the film to the two critical questions and to draw their own insights. The atmosphere in the group had changed. The participants seemed quite moved and their intention to share their feelings had increased significantly. Some points of view still revealed the difficulty they had handling confrontation. For instance: "The one hurt the other more"; "He shouldn't

have given in”, “It was unfair for the older one”. However, most participants’ points of view started to shift towards critical and creative thinking. For instance: “Even if the other provokes you, you should still be patient”; “They were both right”; “They both have to think where they were wrong”; “When two people fight, it is never one’s fault”; “The one needs to help the other”. Finally, one participant told a fascinating story about two brothers who were enemies during the civil war in 1946-1949 and were able to reconcile after many years.

In the *sixth stage*, the participants reflected on how to deal with conflicts within the family. They also identified a number of practices that could help them achieve that goal, such as: “We should try to understand what the other wants without drawing hasty conclusions”; “We shouldn’t accuse others”; “We should show them that we care about them”; “Admit our mistakes”; “Sometimes, to mend a relationship, it helps when one invites the other to eat and drink together”.

Finally, it was decided for the next sessions that some participants would present examples of conflicts they experience in their families and the group would contribute in order to help them to deal with the tension.

## **Epilogue**

From the above example several encouraging indications could be drawn about the usefulness of the engagement of older adults with aesthetic experience, especially of those who have been deprived of the familiarization with art.

However, given that the use of the suggested method is in a stage of development, further research and practice are required in order to approach thoroughly issues like: the ways of older learners’ participation during the phase of the selection of works of art; the process of receiving the aesthetic experience by the learners; the methods to access the whole process.

Moreover, in order for aesthetic experience to have significant impact on the mode of thinking of older learners, there must be learning opportunities so the use of the method isn’t just occasional, but a basic component of the learning programs. Such a

procedure could help to expand the way in which seniors perceive themselves, their relationships and social reality. Furthermore, frequent and qualitative contact with art could contribute to the development of their core skills which are related to critical mode of thinking, such as creativity, interpersonal communication, elaboration of alternative views, problem solving. Finally, the widening of opportunities of participating in art-based learning could lead them to consider art as vital part of their education and their life in general.

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