

Review

Jandrić, Petar and Damir Boras (eds). 2015. *Critical Learning in Digital Networks*. New York: Springer. Hardcover £90.00, e-Book £72.00.

In academia and beyond it is fashionable to claim to be critical and to name one's own approach critical or even to take the form of critical theory. For example, searching in the Social Science Citation Index for the term *critic* (which includes search terms such as critical, critic, criticism) in the title of academic outputs for different timespans indicates this trend: 1986-1995 = 6,815 hits, 1996-2005 = 7,918 hits and 2006-2015 = 15,224 hits. Critique is a widely used and accepted term in academia. But what do we mean by critique, critical thinking and critical theory? There are several definitions of critique, and these vary in their understanding of critical thinking and come to quite different conclusions on both theoretical and political levels.

According to Fuchs (2011, 34), there are three main competing understandings of critique at work today, namely *positivist*, *postmodern* and *Marxist* critique. Representatives of the positivist notion of critique emphasise the importance of individuals as agents who engage in discourse, form opinions and articulate their own views. This is a liberal and purely individualistic approach, in which every opinion and question is valued equally. Within such a framework, critique is primarily understood as having a sceptical attitude. Postmodern critique focuses on negating truth, because all standards are considered to be socially constructed and shaped by power structures. Instead of objective standards in society, there exists only a plurality of different meanings and identities. For a postmodern notion of critique, it is important to deconstruct all truth claims. In contrast, Marxist critique suggests a normative and partial approach, giving voice to the voiceless and supporting the oppressed classes of society (see Allmer 2015, 7). Marxist critique is opposed to all forms of human exploitation, domination and oppression and speaks for whole groups, not just for individuals. Although it values the importance of taking a stance, it argues that there are true and false positions based on true and false readings of society.

As we can see, therefore, there are very substantial differences in the understanding of critique and what it means to be critical in epistemological, ontological and praxiological terms. It should be noted that there is an on-going debate in academia in general and in education studies in particular as how best to understand critical thinking and define critical theory. In the end, it is also a question of how hegemony, power and resources frame the standards and norms which prevail at any one time within the academic community.

In *Critical Learning in Digital Networks* positivist, postmodern and Marxist notions of critique are all represented. According to the editors, Petar Jandrić of the Polytechnic of Zagreb and Damir Boras of the University of Zagreb, this volume brings together different exponents of critical theory who ‘concentrate on external struggles between profit and human rights, inculcation and critique, oppression and emancipation, unequal social relationships and freedom’ (11). The book contains nine chapters from a wide variety of authors, such as Sarah Hayes, Christine Sinclair, Hamish Macleod and Peter McLaren. The book is the latest addition to the Springer series ‘Research in Networked Learning’, edited by Vivien Hodgson and David McConnell. The chapters cover topics such as critical discourse analysis of education technology, commodified e-learning and networked learning alternatives, alternative academic publishing, teacher-student online reality, critical design thinking, graffiti subculture, teacher’s agency, time and space construction in virtual environments and, last but not least, capitalism and education. Although the co-edited volume is about critical theory and networked learning, different contributors come to quite different conclusions, depending on their understanding of critical thinking and critique.

This book is well worth reading and can be highly recommended as it gives a valuable overview of the range and variety of critical accounts of digital networks and education. It raises important questions for contemporary society in general and digital networks and education in particular. In the process it provides profound and thought provoking contributions to the debate - be they positivist, postmodern or Marxist.

References

- Allmer, T. (2015) *Critical Theory and Social Media: Between Emancipation and Commodification*. London: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2011) *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. New York: Routledge.

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