CHAPTER 5

CRITICAL THINKING AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUES

5. INTRODUCTION

Given the numerous problems in current career education policies and programs, it is imperative that educators concerned with democratic learning, as we argued in Chapter Four, develop and pursue practices that provide students with the tools to reclaim the classroom education required for participatory citizenship. When appropriately designed, these tools will foster recognition that vocational experience is an arena in which worker agency may be employed to generate improved working conditions.

In this final chapter of the book, then, we provide some alternative strategies to the epistemologically weak and instrumental models of critical thinking that dominate the current career education landscape. We explore the importance of foundational, or non-instrumental, reasoning to democratic citizenship and consider how it might influence a democratically engineered career education classroom. We also propose an intellectual virtue model of reasoning that focuses on developing certain student dispositions to create critically reflective, informed and effective democratic thinkers in career education. Finally, we briefly discuss the role teacher educators and teachers might play as public intellectuals concerned with promoting democratic ideals. It is not enough simply to talk about and teach democracy. We must set an example for our students by practicing the critical and democratic public engagement we preach.

5.1 Foundational Rationality in Career Education

Consistent with the human capital requirements of economic globalization we have described in the previous chapters, many secondary level career education programs are supposedly designed to prepare students for the
formidable challenges marking contemporary vocational experience such as employment instability and occupational transition (Hyslop-Margison & Armstrong, 2004; Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2003; Spring, 1998). In order to meet this challenge, career education programs advocate teaching students transferable, or generic, critical thinking and problem solving “skills” that are intended to address the volatility of current labour market conditions. In the present labour market, job security is largely an anachronism, and the promise of transferable employability skills, assuming such skills actually exist, entails obvious practical benefits for both workers and employers. A worker possessing these transferable skills could shift seamlessly from workplace to workplace without having to endure constant retraining. Employers would save the considerable resources spent on training new workers for their available occupations.

Unfortunately, as we have noted previously and in spite of this appeal, there are significant pedagogical problems with the supposedly generic construct of critical thinking commonly found in many career education programs. In this section of the chapter, then, we identify the pedagogical and democratic shortcomings of present critical thinking practices within career education. We propose an alternative critical thinking construct for career education based on foundational rationality. Critical thinking that respects foundational rationality encourages students to explore the historical context of contemporary vocational experience by considering other forms of economic organization, and respects the fundamental principles of democratic learning we identified in Chapter Three.

We begin this section by illustrating how the generic employability skill approach to critical thinking suffers from serious conceptual and epistemological difficulties that negatively impact on both its practical effectiveness and democratic appropriateness. We then argue that the emphasis career education places on technical rationality in critical thinking violates principles of democratic learning by disregarding the historical context of vocational experience in favour of entirely instrumental problem solving practices. The instrumental model of critical thinking is also inconsistent with democratic education in the way it excludes students from considering forms of social and economic organization different from those currently in place. Finally, we propose a revised critical thinking construct based on foundational rationality to remedy these problems, and offer examples of concrete classroom strategies that protect democratic learning in career education programs.

Secondary level career education based on human capital assumptions generally categorizes critical thinking and problem solving as transferable employability skills or cross curricular competencies (British Columbia