



## Critical Teaching: Whose Critical Criminology Am I Teaching?

John Scott, Queensland University of Technology

This series asks that we provide tips on teaching critical criminology or ‘deeper pedagogical musings’. I have opted for the latter, because before we can look at teaching practices or curriculum content in order to ‘improve’ teaching, so that it conforms (not a word that some critical criminology folk may be comfortable with) to critical standards or makes more efficient the transfer of critical knowledges, we need to consider what exactly is this thing we call ‘critical criminology’?

What distinguishes critical criminology from the so-called ‘mainstream’? Is it that it is progressive? Is it that it attempts to help the powerless? That it does good? Discovers truths? Promotes justice? Advocates social change? All noble things, but go to any criminology conference and the whole audience might consider itself devoted to some, if not all of these ideals. Put simply, there does not yet exist, to borrow a term from the old spy comedy *Get Smart*, a ‘criminology for evil doers’ and there is certainly no group akin to KAOS within international criminology, striving for global criminological domination, despite what some critical criminologists might like to think...

Ask colleagues, some of whom may identify as critical criminologists, what it is and you will get quite diverse responses. This suggests that people who teach critical criminology may differ widely in what they teach. This, in turn, may inform how they teach. Perhaps true to the critical paradigm, there is lack of consensus and much conflict within the sub-field. I will hazard to say here, however, that some dominant (hegemonic?) traditions can be identified...

Let’s take some license and call one of these ‘structuralist’. It might include within it everything from variants of Marxism and Feminism to left realism. Another tradition might be labelled interpretivist and includes variants of interactionism and some post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches. Many critical criminologists will often work between these two traditions, purists being a minority. The celebrated critical criminologist Jock Young being one example that comes to mind.

A useful distinction might be that structuralist traditions tend to be ‘problem solving’ in their approach, while interpretivist traditions tend to engage in ‘problem analysis’. Again, this distinction has implications for not only what is taught, but how it is taught. Let’s take the example of teaching statistics. Mainstream criminology might view official statistics as largely representing reality. Structuralist traditions might question this and typically suggest that official statistics are in some way inaccurate or ideological. It may be that street crime is over-reported and white-collar crime or domestic crime under-represented or ignored. The issue here is how crime is defined, and the structure of law. The problems are still there for resolution, only the problems are different. In contrast, for interpretivist traditions it is often regarded as pointless to attempt to produce truth claims from crime data. What might be understood and observed are the institutional and public practices which produce statistical data. For example, a crime crackdown might be typified as a moral panic and lead to an increase in reportage of crime and fear of crime.

While both traditions question official understandings of crime, the difference in the two traditions relates to their approach to knowledge claims. Do they have common ground? Yes, and it is their common ground that perhaps makes them ‘critical’. For instance, both agree, to some extent, that crime is not the object of crime control policies, but the product of such policies. Both are also largely concerned with power. But even here differences emerge, as each tradition sees power as operating quite distinctively. In simple terms, structuralism might be considered to provide a less fluid account of power than interpretivist approaches.

So, here might lie the ‘problem’: what we refer to as critical criminology can be a contested terrain which includes contrasting traditions. Sometimes these are expressed as oppositional or reactionary and at other times as a corrective to what might be termed mainstream criminology. This has some broad implications for teaching. One example might be, do we talk to students about race (a constructed identity captured in official data) or should we concentrate on racism (a practice)? Another example, relating to pedagogy: is it possible for a single text or even unit to capture both traditions? Only when critical questions regarding teaching are considered is it possible to start looking at how crime problems might be taught.

Needless to say, those teaching critical criminology need to acknowledge and respect diversity, even among comrades, and digest that there is much common ground between traditions. Critical criminology should not organize itself as some sort of special branch of Control, policing what passes as critical. Critical resources spring from many sources, often depending on context and issue. A primary task in any critical enterprise should be that students interrogate their own (critical) assumptions. As for those mainstream criminologists, at the end of the day it might be best to acknowledge their efforts with the refrain ‘if only they had used their talents for good instead of evil’.