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Critical Literacy as Comprehension

Understanding at Deeper Levels

MAUREEN MCLAUGHLIN AND GLENN DeVVOOD

Our ever-changing world is causing us to rethink what constitutes comprehension of text. Critical educators suggest that readers should learn to comprehend at deeper levels—levels that require understanding beyond the printed page—to critically analyze the author’s message. As Pearson (2001) describes it, we need to read “with a critical edge.”

Reading from a critical literacy perspective is grounded in Freire’s (1983) belief that reading is much more than decoding language—it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Because language and reality are dynamically interwoven, the understanding attained by the critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relation between text and context.

In this chapter, we begin by presenting a theoretical foundation for critical literacy. Next, we explain the principles of critical literacy and provide connections to current research. Finally, we discuss common contexts of critical literacy and the characteristics of critical readers.

Developing a Critical Stance

Although literacy has been commonly defined as the ability to read and write, we now live in an age of multiple literacies (Vogt & McLaughlin, 2004; McLaughlin, 2010). In recent years, the term literacy has expanded in meaning. The word itself has changed from literacy to literacies, because many different literacies have emerged over time. These multiple literacies are diverse, multidimensional, and learned in different ways (McLaughlin, 2010). Critical literacy, which has been in existence for decades, is now experiencing a wider range of acceptance. This has led to its inclusion in the list of literacies for the 21st century—the skills needed to flourish in today’s society and in the future (Abilock, 2007).

Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) suggest that literacy should be defined by its purposes. The functionalist perspective focuses on ever higher levels of reading and writing skills for the purpose of communication, job competence, and self-improvement. Coming from this perspective, books emerge every few years to tell the public that students are not learning much. Similarly, the current emphasis on test scores appears to scold teachers and warn the public of the deteriorating state of public education. Cultural literacy focuses on the canon of common cultural understanding going beyond basic skills to obtain an aesthetic and philosophical appreciation for good literature and excellent writing. A third perspective on literacy comes from liberal ideology and centers more on literacy as a tool for voice and self-expression. While this perspective claims the importance of freedom and self-determination, it does not emphasize the importance of social aspects of literacy or the need for restructuring society. Critical literacy, a fourth perspective, makes power visible and uses language to exercise that power to transform society.

Critical literacy is not a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life as we know it. It envisions a world with more intellectual freedom and equality. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) suggest that, although there are many definitions of critical literacy, most have elements such as these in common: (a) disrupting the commonplace (stereotypes), (b) multiple viewpoints, (c) a focus on socio-political issues, and (d) action steps for social justice.

Freire (1970) suggests that instead of passively accepting the information presented, critical readers should not only read and understand the word, but “read the world” and understand the text’s purpose to avoid being manipulated by it. “Reading the world” enables critically aware readers to comprehend beyond the literal level and think about the function and the production of texts. Reading the world means trying to understand what authors are trying to convey in their messages and how they are communicating those messages. It requires that readers not accept only superficial responses to the text; but rather reflect about the text’s purposes and the author’s style. This reasoning is often
expressed through dialogue with others who are seeking to understand the hidden forces at work. This kind of reflection takes time and requires constant monitoring of the text.

In critical literacy, readers are active participants in the reading process, who move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors—to ponder what the author wants readers to believe, take action, and promote fairness between people. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, action, and transformation (Freire, 1970). Reading from a critical stance requires both the ability and the deliberate inclination to think critically about—to analyze and evaluate—texts (books, media, lyrics, life relationships), meaningfully question their origin and purpose, and take action by representing alternative perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b). Examples of the types of questions that promote reading from a critical stance appear in Figure 40.1.

Comber (2001) has observed that when teachers and students are engaged in critical literacy, they ask complicated questions about language and power, about people and lifestyle, about morality and ethics, about who is advantaged by the way things are and who is disadvantaged. In order to participate in such a classroom environment, readers must play not only the roles of code breakers, meaning makers, and text users, but also the role of text critics (Luke & Freebody, 1999). In other words, readers need to understand that they have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author’s topic, and that they exert that power when they read from a critical stance.

Rosenblatt (2002) suggests that stances are “aspects of consciousness.” Her Aesthetic-Efferent Continuum (1994) reflects the belief that readers transact with text from aesthetic and efferent stances. The aesthetic stance depicts a more emotional perspective; the efferent stance, a more factual one. Rosenblatt (2002) notes that no reading experience is purely aesthetic or purely efferent, but rather readers are always making choices about their thinking, focusing on both stances, and sometimes more on one than the other.

A third stance—the critical stance—can be viewed as another component of that continuum. When reading from a critical stance, readers use their background knowledge to understand the power relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text. In this process, readers do exactly what Luke and Freebody (1999) suggest: They move beyond the roles of code breakers, meaning makers, and text users to become text critics. They exert their ability to question power relationships, problematize simplistic views, and explore perspectives other than the author’s. This reflects what Durrant and Green (2001) describe as “a situated social practice model of language, literacy, and technology learning...authentic learning and cultural apprenticeships within a critical-sociocultural view of discourse and practice” (p. 151). Consequently, students reading from a critical stance raise questions about whose voices are represented, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of a text.

**Principles of Critical Literacy** A number of essential understandings and beliefs about the power relationship that exists between the reader and the author underpin critical literacy (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a). These principles include the following.

**Critical Literacy Focuses on Issues of Power and Promotes Reflection, Transformation, and Action.** Whenever readers commit to understanding a text—whether narrative or expository, they submit to the right of the author to select the topic and determine the treatment of the ideas. Similarly, in conversations and social situations, the listener receives the ideas from the speaker, but upon reflection, the listener may decide the comments were unjust and act to promote equity. Young (2009) reported student reflections about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT)

### Print (Books, newspapers, magazines, song lyrics, hypertext, etc.):

- Whose viewpoint is expressed?
  - What does the author want us to think?
  - Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?
  - How might alternative perspectives be represented?

- How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance?
- Where do the Internet links lead you and what does that mean?
- What action might you take based on what you have learned?

### Video/Photographs:

- Who is in the video/photograph?
- Why are they there?
- What does the videographer/photographer want you to think?
- Who/what is missing from the video/photograph? (silenced? discounted?)

- What might an alternative video show?
- What might an alternative photograph look like?
- How would that contribute to your understanding the video or photograph from a critical stance?
- What action might you take based on what you have viewed?

**Figure 40.1** Questions that promote reading from a critical stance.
issues among high school students. The students identified comments like “that’s so gay” as synonymous with “that is stupid.” With the recognition that they and society in general marginalized people of LGBT orientation, students went on the identify ways in which they were privileged as heterosexuals with phrases such as: ability to discuss sexual issues openly, be approved by the church and family, experience stories about heterosexual love, and not being made fun of. Classroom dialogue about this topic led to transformation as university representatives from the LGBT community spoke to groups. Many students showed their solidarity with the LGBT panel by wearing white t-shirts and jeans and writing articles in the school newspaper. So after students reflected on power relationships among students of different sexual orientations, students acted to transform the attitudes of students in their school. In contrast to those who believe in the liberal ideology, critical students know that good intentions or awareness of an unjust situation will not transform it. They must act on their knowledge.

This dialogue, which represents a cycle of, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” is what Freire (1970, p. 36) calls praxis. By nature, this process is not passive, but active, challenging and disrupting the ideal (Green, 2001) or commonplace (Lewison et al., 2002) for the purpose of relieving the inequity and injustice.

Critical Literacy Focuses on the Problem and its Complexity. Educational situations that are fairly intricate are often viewed from an essentialist—very simplistic—perspective. In critical literacy, rather than accepting an essentialist view, we would engage in problematizing—seeking to understand the problem and its complexity. In other words, we would raise questions and seek alternative explanations as a way of more fully acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the situation. For example, it would be essentialist to merely suggest that unmotivated students should receive an extrinsic reward for reading or be punished for not reading. Problematizing—or examining the complexity of this situation—would reveal that the lack of motivation is likely due to a variety of factors including poor quality texts, students’ past reading experiences, classroom climate, self-efficacy, purpose, or limited opportunities to self-select, read, and discuss books in social settings.

Examining Multiple Perspectives Is an Important Aspect of Critical Literacy. Expressing ideas from a variety of perspectives challenges students to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings (McLaughlin, 2001). Examining texts from a variety of viewpoints is applicable in a wide range of classes including literature, social studies, science, and mathematics. Appreciation for and exploration of these alternative perspectives facilitates our viewing situations from a critical stance (Lewison et al., 2002; McLaughlin, 2001).

Techniques that Promote Critical Literacy are Dynamic and Adapt to the Contexts in Which They Are Used. There is no list of methods in critical literacy that works the same way in all contexts all the time. No technique that promotes critical literacy can be exported to another setting without adapting it to that context. As Freire (1998, p. xi) has observed, “It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them.” It is key to any exploration of critical literacy that the teacher constantly assess student responses to ensure that the experience is true to the philosophy and goals of critical literacy, but not necessarily consistent with the examples of others who practice critical literacy. For example, teachers might begin using an approach to critical literacy that is presented in this article or that they have seen working in another classroom. But upon reflecting on instructional goals and what is happening in their classes, they may adapt the method to make it more applicable—more meaningful—in that particular context. The dynamic nature of critical literacy supports this type of adaptation. There is a sense of empowerment and confidence in the act of creation that cannot be achieved by copying. Even when a method has been used, it is never quite the same. This is why those who are critically aware are fond of quoting Antonio Machado (1982, p. 142), the Spanish poet, who said, “Caminante, no hay camino, Se hace el camino al andar” (Traveler, there is no road. The road is made as you walk).

In the same way, teacher education of critical literacy and the formation of professional identity become deeper and more complex through dialogue (which serves as part of reflection) about student praxis in classroom situations (Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006). For example, upon reflection of their practice in classrooms, teacher education students who were struggling to implement critical literacy projects, decided to switch their practice and intermittently infuse critical moments in the regular curriculum (Rogers, 2007). In a 4-year study of two teacher education students, Jones and Enriquez (2009) reveal a complexity of uneven growth or no growth dependent upon the interweaving of formal learning and their personal, social, and political experiences. While the effectiveness of a student’s growth in critical literacy is not guaranteed, they do caution professors: (a) not to assume that intellectual shifts in thinking will transfer to moral shifts in classroom practice, (b) not to make assumptions about students’ ability to do critical literacy, (c) dialogue over an extended period of time is more productive than short term experiences. Though much of the dialogue that occurs to create changes in teacher educational practice is individual, small group, and whole class, Woodcock (2009) also found significant growth in dialogue occurring in online classes.

After a teacher understands the theoretical foundations of critical literacy and is committed to the cycle of praxis, some teachers take on a repertoire of pedagogical tools and adapt them to their classroom context. Many teachers like to use questions to interrogate text (see Figure 40.1). These questions used one at a time or in groups serve as catalysts toward deeper understanding of the text for dyad, small group, and whole group discussion. After reading a narra-
tive, some teachers and students find it helpful to imagine alternative narratives by creating a new ending to the story or by substituting a different character for one in the story or by using a different setting. Discussion after making the switch may reveal power relationships or biases in the story. For example, using a gender switch, replace Snow White with a boy to see if it makes sense. Most likely students will find a need to change the part of the story in which the Queen looks at herself in the mirror and compares her looks to the beauty of Snow White. This leads to a discussion about differing expectations for women and men and their appearance. In the Bubble Project (http://thebubbleproject.com), for example, students switch texts by placing speech bubbles on pictures or in book illustrations and write an alternative narrative disrupting the ideas of the story.

Other teachers find that juxtaposing an image/story/movie that reflects a different theme/character/setting with the original text helps students raise issues that disrupt the text and reveal the hidden values implicit in the story. Teachers can also encourage students to read two different versions of informational text about the same topic to see what new understandings come to light. For example, they can read different perspectives on the Civil War to see that reality can be represented in diverse ways depending on the perspective of the author.

The principles of critical literacy help us understand what critical literacy is and how it functions. It is a dynamic process that examines power relationships, expands our thinking, and enlightens our perceptions as we read both the word and the world—as we read from a critical stance.

Critical literacy is partly an understanding that although we desire life and problems to be simple, they are actually more complex. So people often stereotype. Situations in the simplest form (and therefore untrue or distorted form) are referred to as essentialist or reductionist. In order to view a situation, which appears to be simple, in more sophisticated and complex ways, classroom teachers ask students to problematize the situation. To problematize, one asks lots of questions about the situation. For example, if one were to say, “Women are more sensitive than men.” One might start asking questions to understand more complex ways, such as, Who said that? Why did they say that? Is it always true? When is it not true? What does it mean to be sensitive? How do people become sensitive? After asking such questions, it becomes clear that the statement is too simplistic and needs to be revised.

Common Contexts of Critical Literacy The principles of critical literacy have been applied to a wide range of contexts to challenge social norms and oppressive status quo practices. Probably more than any other area, the literature reveals many articles on sex role stereotypes. While children occasionally cross the borders of status quo practices such as gender-segregated lunch rooms, primary school students often challenge storylines in fairy tales (Heffernan & Lewiston, 2005). For example, Bourke (2008) allows his first graders to speak freely about fairy tales; he finds that they have no trouble expressing countertexts. One boy commenting on Sleeping Beauty told his teacher that he doesn’t like kissing and that after being woken up, Sleeping Beauty argued that she didn’t want to be kissed and would have been better off sleeping. Others report that girls who discover the limitations of their situation after they identify with female characters in fairy tales often create counter narratives that overcome the gender role stereotypes of the story (Wohlwend, 2009).

The second most common context in critical literacy addresses issues of culture and the content of the curriculum. In a history class in a segregated neighborhood, Duffy (2008) challenges the authority of the school sanctioned text to get students to investigate beyond the text and write essays concerning Thomas Jefferson’s actions as a slave holder, which so drastically contradicts his words as a president. Other teachers find critical consciousness and cultural awareness important tools for students from traditionally oppressed cultures when they interrogate texts in school (Esposito & Swain, 2009). Lesley (2008) found her students interpreted a book about a White foster child from Long Island, Hollis Woods, in literal ways, but when reading poems from the recording artist Tupac Shakur’s book, The Rose That Grew from Concrete (1999), her perspective of their reading ability shifted. Similarly, books like Monster by Walter Dean Meyers (2001), gave voice to the lives of urban teens, access to school, and opportunities to discuss the issues more deeply. In contrast, the setting and character of the text in Hollis Woods inhibited the students’ desire to comprehend the text.

Becoming Critically Aware

It is important to note that we cannot just “become” critically literate. It is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time. This includes developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires, changing with time and circumstance, engaging in self-critical practices, and remaining open to possibilities (Comber, 2001).

Readers who are critically aware become open-minded, active, strategic learners who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective. They know the information they encounter has been authored from particular perspectives for particular purposes and they question it. They understand that meaning is “grounded in the social, political, cultural and historic contexts of the reading event” (Serafini, 2003), and they realize that when they read from a critical perspective, they not only become more engaged, but also comprehend at deeper levels.

References


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