What is critical literacy? What is its history? What are its practices in society and the classroom?

From Heather Coffey's "Resistant Perspective Producing Counter Texts"
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Critical literacy is the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. For the purposes of critical literacy, *text* is defined as a "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society".[1] Accordingly, songs, novels, conversations, pictures, movies, etc. are all considered texts.

The development of critical literacy skills enables people to interpret messages in the modern world through a critical lens and challenge the power relations within those messages. Teachers who facilitate the development of critical literacy encourage students to interrogate societal issues and institutions like family, poverty, education, equity, and equality in order to critique the structures that serve as norms as well as to demonstrate how these norms are not experienced by all members of society.

History and theory of critical literacy

The term "critical literacy" was developed by social critical theorists concerned with dismantling social injustice and inequalities. These critical theorists contend that unequal power relationships are prevalent, and those in power are the ones who generally choose what truths are to be privileged. Through institutions like schooling and government, these ideologies are supported, thereby perpetuating the status quo. Within schools, only particular knowledge is legitimized, thus excluding groups who are unable to contribute to the process of the authentication of that knowledge. According to Ann Beck, "Critical educational theory or critical pedagogy applies the tenets of critical social theory to the educational arena and takes on the task of examining how schools reproduce inequality and justice."[2].

Critical social theorists are concerned with oppressive and unjust relationships produced by traditional forms of schooling and critique the traditional models of education, which typically place the teacher at the front of the classroom possessing and transmitting the knowledge to students who sit idly "learning" or receiving the information.[3]

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire provides an example of how critical literacy is developed in an educational context. Freire proposes a system in which students become more socially aware through critique of multiple forms of injustice. This awareness cannot be achieved if students are not given the opportunity to explore and construct knowledge. Freire describes a traditional type of education as the "banking concept of education." This model of education is characterized by instruction that "turns [students] into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher." In these classrooms, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing," and the teachers separate themselves as being the possessors of knowledge.[4] In this role, the teacher does not necessarily challenge the students to think authentically or value students' own "funds of knowledge."

In opposition to the banking model, teachers who recognize the possible value of developing critical literacy do not view their students as vessels to be filled, and instead create experiences that offer students opportunities to actively construct knowledge. In this model, schools become spaces where students interrogate social conditions through dialogue about issues significant to their lives. Teachers engaged in critical literacy serve less as instructors and more as facilitators of conversations that question traditional power relations. “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other”.[5] Using critical pedagogical methods, teachers create spaces where they can be learners and students can be teachers, thus providing a context for everyone to construct and interrogate theories of knowledge.

Critical literacy in practice

The development of critical literacy encourages students to question issues of power — explicitly disparities within social contexts like socio-economic status, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.[6] Becoming critically literate means that students have mastered the ability to read and critique messages in texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged. Essentially, teachers using critical pedagogy demonstrate how to evaluate the function language plays in the social construction of the self. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear suggest that when students become critically literate, they can examine ongoing development, the parts they play in the world, and how they make sense of experiences.[7]

Facilitating the development of critical literacy promotes the examination and reform of social situations and exposes students to the biases and hidden agendas within texts.[8] Thus, in order to become critically literate, one must learn to “read” in a reflective manner; “read” in this connotation means to give meaning to messages of all kinds, instead of just looking at the words on a page and comprehending the meaning of those words. Instruction that encourages critical literacy development comes as a response to the marginalization of a growing number of American students who are not members of the culturally dominant group of white, middle-class youths. Furthermore, according to Adrian Blackledge, critical literacy emphasizes the potential of written language “to be a tool for people to analyze the division of power and resources in their society and transform discriminatory structures.”[9]

Critical literacy and social action

There is often an activist component to critical literacy education, where the teacher serves as the facilitator of social change. Joseph Kretovics suggests that in addition to teaching students functional skills, the teacher must also provide “conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices.”[10] Furthermore, with the activist potential in critical literacy education, students will learn how to envision a world in which all people have access and opportunity.[11] When students learn to use the tools of critical literacy, they can expose, discuss, and attempt to solve social injustices within their own lives.

When engaging in the development of critical literacy skills, students learn to acknowledge the unfair privileging of certain dominant discourses in which society engages. Students participate in conversations about the injustices of privileging one group or ideal over another because of skin color or socio-economic status, and teachers can help to empower students by providing opportunities for them to find their voices. Teachers engaged in methods that support critical literacy can, as Lisa Delpit suggests, “let our students know they can resist a system that seeks to limit them to the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder.”[12]

By developing lessons based on dialogue with students about their needs and interests, educators can invite students to take part in a larger community discourse that attempts to solve problems and create alternatives to oppressive situations. Linda Christensen suggests connecting the curriculum to the outside world in a tangible way. By participating in social action projects or creating a public discourse, students may see the relation between curriculum and the world beyond the walls of the school. Essentially, students learn to restructure their knowledge base and challenge accepted societal norms in order to transform all institutions that oppress.[13]

Critical literacy in the classroom

Because critical literacy theory focuses on the relationships between language, power, social practice, and access to social goods and services, there are numerous methods of engaging students in becoming critical members of their society. Within the frame of critical literacy, it is important to look at texts, like novels, magazine articles, short stories, films, etc., through a lens that challenges societal norms. Students can evaluate whose knowledge is being privileged in texts and de-construct the message of those meanings. As readers, students must also evaluate the social construction of a text and question the factors that may have influenced the author to create the text in a specific manner. Moreover, using critical literacy, teachers encourage students to look at texts from other perspectives and re-create them from the standpoint of marginalized groups in order to analyze the power relations and social inequities promoted by the texts.

Edward Behrman explains that the development of critical literacy encourages social justice and exploration of language and literature in many forms. Behrman suggests that the specific types of lessons examine power relationships that are found in language and literature and that these practices show students that language is never neutral. Because critical literacy looks different in every classroom, based on the subject matter and the population of students, there is no formula for how teachers engage students in mastery of critical literacy; however, there are some practices that appear in lessons more commonly. Behrman maintains that developing a pedagogy that includes critical literacy is an organic process that continually needs to be revisited and refined.[14]

Behrman reviewed articles, published between 1999 and 2003 in *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* that focused on lessons and units emphasizing critical literacy pedagogy in middle and high school grades. Behrman's methodology included searching electronic databases for the keyword 'critical literacy.' After refining his search to include articles that contained classroom applications only, Behrman found 36 articles that presented "lessons or units intended to support critical literacy at the upper primary or secondary levels (grades 4-12)."[15]

Behrman's search revealed that the most commonly used practices that support critical literacy included: reading supplementary texts; reading multiple texts; reading from a resistant perspective; producing counter-texts; having students conduct research about topics of personal interest; and challenging students to take social action.16

Reading Supplemental Texts

Reading supplementary texts representative of today's changing media and technology allows students to make connections with the literature or content being studied. Supplementary texts also provide the context for students to confront social issues that are often avoided by canonical works and/or are not covered in dated textbooks. Students have the opportunity to critique themes and issues similar to those found in traditional texts, but they can also look at other mediums. Furthermore, teachers who use supplementary texts can encourage conversations about social issues that may not be covered in the typical sterile required reading curriculum of schools. According to Morrell, by offering students the opportunity to review appropriate Internet resources, songs, television programming, and advertisements, as well as many other visual mediums, students have exposure to popular texts they can analyze outside of school as well.[17]

Classroom application

Practitioners can use lyrics from popular music as supplementary texts in order to engage students in discussion about race, gender, religion, politics, etc. In an article published in *Reading Online*, Carol Lloyd suggests using popular songs to show students how to make connections between the popular media and political issues. For example, Lloyd recommends using the lyrics of "Buffalo Soldier," written by Bob Marley, as a supplementary text that mentions the freed slaves who fought as soldiers in America during the 19th century; their stories rarely appear in a traditional textbook. An examination of the lyrics can lead to a discussion about the exclusion of this group of Americans from the history books. Similarly, Lloyd shows how teachers can use the lyrics of popular songs to initiate discussion about economic and political issues faced by Americans. This type of engagement with texts appeals to students' interests, exposes them to new forms of text and also challenges the dominant ideology of the textbook — all of which are essential components of critical literacy.[18]

Reading Multiple Texts

Incorporating multiple texts based on similar literary themes offers students the opportunity to critique the values or voices that are being promoted. Furthermore, this practice challenges the idea that meaning is fixed and encourages students to use evidence to support their interpretation.[19] Students can evaluate the social, cultural, and historical frameworks of texts by analyzing differing perspectives of a single event.

Classroom application

An example of this practice would be offering students the choice of reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an American novel written by a white, southern female; *Wolf Whistle*, a novel with a similar theme of racial discrimination written by Lewis Nordan, a white, southern man; *A Lesson Before Dying*by Ernest J. Gaines, a southern African-American man; or the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, an African-American woman from the Midwest. All of these authors wrote about similar topics and themes during the same time period and were born in the pre-Civil Rights Era. By reading the diverse perspectives of analogous themes and evaluating the voices of these authors, students can assess the perspective of the authors in order to better understand their value systems and why characters were portrayed in a certain manner. A comparative study of these four authors and novels would offer students the opportunity to explore how race, gender, and socio-economic status are portrayed by authors with dissimilar backgrounds.

Reading from a Resistant Perspective

Behrman suggests that the practice of reading from the perspective of resistance involves students in the interpretation of a text from the viewpoint of the world and not just the common Euro-centric ideology often found in standard texts.[20] By considering how people from different backgrounds (i.e., racial, cultural, gender, religious, socio-economic status, sexual orientation) would read the same text, students can gain a better understanding of how the representative group would be affected by a reading of a text.[21] This type of reading would be particularly effective and beneficial in social studies classes because it would offer students multiple perspectives of the same event. By providing the stories of people whose voices typically aren't heard, teachers offer students the opportunity to participate in dialogue about why certain perspectives are normally privileged while others are silenced.

Classroom application

Behrman's search revealed that some teachers used the resistant-perspective approach and students learned to read a text using a functional grammar (dialectical) or by critiquing the word choice of an author in a song or news report. In learning to read from a resistant perspective, students can confront certain stereotypes promoted by a text and deconstruct the meaning or value being privileged.

Producing Counter Texts

Another common practice found in classrooms that promote a critical literacy involves having students produce counter-texts. Essentially, this involves having students generate narratives or other texts, including multi-media creations, from a non-mainstream perspective. “Producing counter-texts can serve to validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students and other underrepresented groups.”[22] This approach to curriculum offers students occasions to speak from the point of view of those voices that are often silenced or marginalized, thereby empowering them.

Classroom application

Practitioners recommended that counter-texts may be produced in reading logs, journals, weblogs, personal narratives, and student-created videos.[23] When students produce counter-texts and evaluate the process they used in order to construct the text, they validate their own perspectives.

Providing Opportunities for Student Choice

Student choice in any type of research has long been touted by constructivists and critical pedagogues like John Dewey and Howard Gardner as an effective way to involve, encourage, and empower students to actively participate in the construction of knowledge.[24] Similarly, proponents of critical literacy theory in classrooms suggest that by allowing student choice, teachers legitimize interests and knowledge of their students.[25]Choosing a topic for research, however, is not considered critical unless students evaluate the problems involved in society and how the conditions of society created this problem.

Classroom application

An example of providing student choice in assignments is participation in literature circles or book clubs. Students select books based on interest and then conduct research based on a theme or the context of the novel. While reading chosen novels and discussing the historical or political context of the novel, students can evaluate why the author chose to write in a particular manner and hypothesize why the author may have privileged certain themes. Literature circles not only provide students with choices about reading material, but this practice also involves students in discussion about the novel, thus opening dialogue for diverse perspectives.

Taking Social Action

Moving students to social action is also a practice characteristic of critical literacy; students engaging in social action projects can improve the conditions of their communities.[26] By taking research outside of the classroom, students can actually participate in society based on the information they discover. Once students research and better understand aspects of their school or community, they may engage in projects to improve an area that is lacking. Behrman contends that by following this framework, teachers can help students learn how literacy can be used as a “vehicle for social change.”[27]

Other Methods

Incorporating media and technology is another popular strategy for including critical literacy in the classroom. The internet, popular media, and technology play an increasingly larger function in American society. The Annenberg Public Policy Center reports that 99 percent of American households have televisions[28], and Gentile and Walsh found that children ages 2–17 watch an average of 25 hours of television per week.[29]According to research completed by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 68 percent of children ages 9-

17 used the Internet in September 2001.[30] Text messaging, blogging, creating identity profiles on social networking websites, and countless other activities are altering the way ideas are represented and communicated in society. As a result of the ways texts are constantly changing, classroom instruction also has to be altered to keep up with students' needs. Thus, it is imperative that teachers demonstrate to students how to both navigate and interrogate the impact media and technology has on their lives.

According to Myriam Torres and Maria Mercado, teachers must show students how to "read between the lines of the media messages, question the interests behind them, and learn how to look for alternative ways to be informed and/or entertained".[31] Furthermore, because students have "free" access to an astonishing amount of information, they must be prepared to evaluate the credibility of sources so that they are not completely vulnerable to fraudulent information. Thus, teachers must demonstrate how the media and the Internet can misinform and provide messages that are harmful if taken as fact.

In addition to the curricular demands of a critical classroom, Behrman notes that in all the cases he found, the dynamics between students and teachers are also important.[32] Similar to Freire's notion that teachers should be learners and learners should be teachers, a classroom that acknowledges the critical literacy theory must also challenge traditional hierarchical relationships between the students and teacher.

Notes

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