Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy

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The author examines a number of articles published between 1999 and 2003 that present lessons or units to support critical literacy at the upper primary or secondary levels.

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Critical literacy is now well established as a major ideological construct influencing literacy education (Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2002). The important status accorded to critical literacy has been underscored by the formation of the International Reading Association's Critical Perspectives in Literacy Committee to assist teachers in adopting and implementing a critical perspective on literacy in their classrooms (International Reading Association, 2004). But exactly how does critical literacy affect classroom-based instructional decisions, and what teaching strategies are consistent with a critical literacy orientation?

Answers to these questions are complicated in that critical literacy is usually described as a theory with implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology. For instance, Luke (2000) called critical literacy education "a theoretical and practical attitude" (p. 454), and Morgan and Wyatt-Smith (2000) termed critical literacy "overtly a theory for practice" (p. 124). As a theory, critical literacy espouses that educa-

tion can foster social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations. Among the aims of critical literacy are to have students examine the power relationships inherent in language use, recognize that language is not neutral, and confront their own values in the production and reception of language (Janks, 1993; Lankshear, 1994, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1999).

Critical literacy, however, appears to lack a consistently applied set of instructional strategies that would mark it as a coherent curricular approach. Indeed, some critical literacy proponents have even resisted the development of a too narrowly conceived instructional methodology. While Luke (2000) recognized varied classroom strategies to foster critical literacy, he cautioned against a "formula for 'doing' critical literacy in the classroom" (pp. 453–454) and questioned the value of a state-mandated curriculum policy supporting critical literacy. Instead, he envisioned an organic approach to critical literacy wherein teachers and students "invent" critical literacies in the classroom. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) warned that critical literacy practices should not be exported from one classroom to another without local adaptation, and Comber (2001) asserted that "critical literacy needs to be continually redefined in practice" (p. 100).

One reason critical literacy may defy a unified curricular approach is that as a theory it depends upon multiple intellectual strands. Janks (2000) argued that there are four orientations to critical literacy education, each based on a different view of the relationship between language and power. Educators working from a *domination* perspective consider how language and signs maintain positions of social and political domination. Those working from an *access* perspective attempt to provide access to dominant forms of language without compromising the integrity of nondominant forms. A *diversity* perspective requires attention to the way that uses of language create social identities. Finally, a *design* perspective emphasizes the need to use and select from a range of available semiotic signs. According to Janks, these four interdependent orientations to critical literacy education suggest a range of pedagogical approaches. In order to achieve the social justice goal of critical literacy, all four orientations must be seamed together "in complex moves" (p. 179) to balance one another.

Similarly, Luke (2000) suggested that the "unruly and at times discordant" (p. 453) theoretical positions that inform critical literacy (those of Valentin Voloshinov, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Paulo Freire) may translate into various classroom practices. These practices may include identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts. A critical literacy agenda should therefore encourage teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed.

The multiplicity of conceptual positions that influence critical literacy and the resistance to a definitive critical literacy pedagogy place responsibility for curriculum development on teachers and teacher educators amid "the flux and flow of real-world obstacles and pressures" (Corson, 2002,

p. 11). Translating critical literacy theory into practice therefore presents a difficult challenge demanding innovative and local solutions.

The purpose of this review is to examine recently published articles that provide classroom applications of critical literacy instruction for adolescent learners, so that teachers and teacher educators who support the theory of critical literacy and its democratizing values may benefit from the experience of others who have already begun the crossing from theory to practice. In the sense that the articles reviewed are inclusive of all indexed articles published over a five-year period (1999–2003), what emerges from the review is a "state of the field" in critical literacy instruction at the upper primary and secondary levels.

The review process

In order to identify classroom practices for this review, the keyword *critical literacy* was entered using four electronic databases: Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsychArticles, and PsychInfo. The search yielded 264 citations for the years 1999 through 2003. Review of the 264 abstracts suggested 56 articles that might include sufficiently detailed descriptions of critical literacy lessons or units. Next, the 56 articles were read to confirm that each described an upper primary or secondary school classroom practice. During this phase, 21 articles were dropped from the review. Some of these eliminated articles described a lower primary or postsecondary practice or proposed general guidelines without describing any classroom application. A second literature search using the ProQuest Educational Journal database (keywords *critical literacy + teaching + elementary* or *middle* or *high school*) yielded 1 additional article.

Included in this review are 36 articles that present lessons or units intended to support critical literacy at the upper primary or secondary levels (grades 4–12). Although critical literacy is not a discipline-bound theory and may be applied to the study of language and text in any subject area, 24 of the 36 articles present activities within a language

arts, interdisciplinary language arts–social studies, or interdisciplinary language arts–science context. Social studies is the second most frequent subject area represented (8 articles). The remaining articles describe practices in science, writing with special needs students, the computer lab, and an unspecified subject area. Thirty-three of the articles describe a traditional classroom setting, 2 articles describe home schooling, and 1 article describes tutoring sessions.

In some articles the classroom practice is the focus of a research investigation. In others the classroom practice is presented as an example within a broader discussion of critical literacy, and in a few articles the classroom practice is simply being shared as a lesson or unit idea. In the review, articles are distinguished by the classroom practice rather than their intent. Most classroom practices have not been formally evaluated by the contributing authors, nor is there any attempt here to evaluate the effectiveness of each practice.

The review organizes the classroom practices into six broad categories based on student activities or tasks: (1) reading supplementary texts, (2) reading multiple texts, (3) reading from a resistant perspective, (4) producing counter-texts, (5) conducting student-choice research projects, and (6) taking social action.

Reading supplementary texts

Often teachers find that to develop a critical perspective, traditional classroom texts need to be supplemented by other works of fiction, nonfiction, film, or popular culture. Underlying this approach is the assumption that traditional or canonical texts are somehow deficient in helping students focus on social issues, and that supplementary texts may allow students to confront social issues glossed over or avoided by traditional texts.

Houser (2001) proposed that to develop social, cultural, and ecological understanding, children's or adolescent literature—such as Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (2000, Speak), Julie Brinckloe's *Fireflies* (1986, Aladdin),

and Jean Craighead George's *The Missing 'Gator of Gumbo Limbo* (1993, HarperTrophy)—may be more beneficial than textbooks, which tend to be sanitized and devoid of multiple perspectives. Bean and Moni (2003) similarly advocated reading young adult novels to stimulate discussions of societal conflicts and teen problems. Students may be assigned supplementary fiction specifically because it focuses on an important social issue such as racial discrimination, slavery, or marginalization (Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Johnson & Ciancio, 2003; Leland et al., 2003; Rogers, 2002; Tyson, 1999).

Students can also read supplementary non-fiction, as in studying great leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Indira Gandhi, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Nelson Mandela to experience the power of language to shape thought and mobilize action (Sisk, 2002). Music and film likewise may supplement traditional texts. Songs by popular artists (e.g., Tracy Chapman, Phil Collins, Marvin Gaye, John Mellencamp, and Sting) may provide students with politically contextualized understandings of issues related to the environment, history, economics, politics, and racism (Lloyd, 2003). In one class, a teacher using film as supplementary text paired Francis Ford Coppola's film version of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* with Homer's *The Odyssey* to demonstrate parallels between contemporary power struggles and those in canonical texts (Morrell, 2000).

Clearly the legitimacy of such an approach must be based on the supposed deficit in the traditional text (and the proposed compensatory virtues of the supplementary text). Yet an assertion that a text minimizes the social impact of an event, presents a problem from an ethnocentric or gender-based viewpoint, or considers an activity within a historically situated, noncontemporaneous context need not invalidate study of the traditional text. Those very features may be the focus of critical inquiry.

Reading multiple texts

To introduce students to the subjectivity of authorship, another classroom practice to develop a

critical perspective is reading multiple texts on the same topic. For example, Spires (1999) wanted her students to analyze how the author portrays different social groups within Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1988, Warner Books). In the prereading activity described, students read five versions of the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood" and responded in their journals to this question: Whose values are being promoted in these different versions?

Mellor and Patterson (2000) similarly used multiple texts as an entry to criticality. Their classroom practice was intended to disrupt the notion that textual meaning is fixed and to subvert an interpretation of William Shakespeare's work as "historical yet eternal." Students read two critical analyses of Ophelia (pious versus wanton) and then examined selected scenes from *Hamlet* to evaluate their own readings of Ophelia. The exercise allowed students to recognize how a critic may include or ignore evidence to "fit" an interpretation.

Reading multiple texts encourages students to understand authorship as situated activity. Students can consider who constructed the text, when, where, why, and the values on which it was based. By experiencing different treatments of the same topic or event, students begin to recognize that text is not "true" in any absolute sense but a rendering as portrayed by an author.

Reading from a resistant perspective

A text may be interpreted from various positions, including the invited, author-centered view and the resistant, world-centered view (Alford, 2001). Students can be encouraged to "peel" different layers of meaning from a text and to explore how the same reader might approach a text from different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion (Foss, 2002). This classroom practice places emphasis on how the reader's values and the author's stance can position the reader to form an interpretation of text. Reading from a resistant perspective re-

quires a conscious awareness of the influences upon text interpretation.

Acquiring a resistant perspective is sometimes stimulated by asking students to assume new or unfamiliar identities. For example, in a unit on Wisconsin state history, the teacher organized students into small groups that took on a family identity (e.g., Native American, German American, English American) and then expressed their family's views as Wisconsin evolved from part of the Northwest Territory to a separate territory and then to statehood (McCall, 2002). Similarly, another teacher introduced Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1953, HarperTrophy) by asking students to consider their reactions to the white and Native American characters. Finding their responses Eurocentric, she encouraged students to reconsider their responses from a Native American point of view (Kuhlman, 2001).

A resistant perspective can also be motivated by inviting students to read from an alternative frame of reference. Lien (2003) described a simulation game to introduce the concept of capital (using chocolate candy) as a warm-up for a critical literacy unit about Vietnamese history and culture. Via the simulation she allowed students to experience how wealth or poverty can differentially affect interpretations of communism and resource allocation.

Several articles describe how resistant reading is introduced through an analysis of author stance and text features and their effect on positioning the reader (Baker, Gormley, Lawler, & McDermott, 2001; Caviglia, 2002; Doherty, 2002; Howie, 2002a; Parr, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Young, 2001), including one example of reading and interpreting a documentary film (Howie, 2002b). Wilson showed how articles in popular music magazines can be used to help students question the notion of author neutrality. In the unit described, students identified not only what they learned but also what they did not learn about the performers interviewed in the magazine, and they attempted to determine why the author

asked particular questions during an interview. Young detailed how male students analyzed the advertising and articles in teen magazines to determine the intended readership of each. Next they reviewed the articles to discover how the magazines portrayed the "perfect boy" and the "perfect girl." The boys decided that one of the magazines was slanted toward sports-minded girls but that the others were slanted toward clothes-minded girls. Caviglia described classroom activities in which students were told a lie or asked to construct a lie. She proposed lie detecting as a step toward developing a resistant perspective, because determining whether a statement is accurate requires analysis of not only facts but also motives and ideologies of the writer and the reader.

Another application of the resistant-perspective approach involves having students analyze text using functional grammar (Unsworth, 1999; Williams, 2001) or lexical classification (Young, 2000). Functional grammar considers the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in a clause, unlike traditional grammar that focuses on correctness of structure. For example, in a unit combining critical literacy and functional grammar, students were given an assignment to contrast constructions of gender in popular songs (Williams). Each student selected a song and accompanying video clip to identify the actor (subject), process (verb), process type (e.g., action verb), and goal (object). As an alternative, using lexical classification, students can determine how gender is represented by the author. For instance, an article on soccer described a superior female athlete as "young," "girl," and "top woman," but for a superior male athlete the description included "player," "skills were subtle," and "great" (Young). With both methods the student is required to consider how the author's conscious choice of words, word order, or sentence structure can position the reader to accept an argument or value a statement from the writer's perspective.

Producing countertexts

A countertext or counternarrative is a student-created text that presents a topic from a nonmainstream perspective. Producing countertexts can serve to validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students and other underrepresented groups. The countertext may be a personal response to the topic being learned, as in a reading log or journal (Hanrahan, 1999; Young, 2000), a personal narrative (Fairbanks, 2000; Montgomery & Kahn, 2003), or a conscious effort to write from another's point of view (Spires, 1999). For example, Hanrahan proposed that journal writing in a science class can not only provide students with avenues to construct their understandings of science concepts but also endorse the students' expressions of their experience.

In one extensive application of countertext, black students in a segregated South African high school set out to create a text about young lovers in their rural village. They produced a comic that included three stories: The first was about lovers who had a baby and got married, the second was an account of how the students went about revising the original story, and the third was the revised story in which the girl insisted on safe sex and stopped dating when she learned her boyfriend was cheating. To create the revised romance, students considered multiple views of dating, sex, fidelity, and violence against women. Thus in the revised story they were able to move away from a narrative of male domination (Shariff & Janks, 2001).

Essentially the countertext approach identifies students as members of a marginalized subgroup whose "voice" has been given legitimacy. Therefore, the successful use of countertext may require classroom conversation about the process by which any text gains acceptance, within both the immediate and more global communities.

Conducting student-choice research projects

Whereas producing countertexts places emphasis on the student's perspective, this next category

places emphasis on the student's choice of topic. A student-choice research project is envisioned as a way to lessen the space between school-sanctioned topics and those usually considered "kid's business" (Fairbanks, 2000). Each student identifies an important personal topic and then conducts extensive research on it. The rationale underlying this approach is that the everyday events occurring in the lives of students are legitimate objects of academic study. The curriculum becomes negotiable when students are permitted to conduct research on personal topics, and the students gain more control over their own learning.

For example, Rubin (2002) reported on a case study of six female students using an I-Search technique to investigate a social issue of personal interest. Students selected as personal topics acquaintance rape, depression and suicide, body image, bipolar disorder, and gender equity in sports. The research project required library and electronic sources, interviews, and observations.

For student-choice research projects to cultivate critical literacy, however, the activity must go beyond simply selecting a topic and finding library books or websites on the topic. Students must become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem.

Taking social action

In order to employ their literacy skills to challenge power structures, students can engage in social action projects aimed at making a real difference in their or others' lives. The rationale for social action is that critical literacy instruction should not be limited to the promotion of personalized or internalized reconceptualizations of language, power, and text. Whereas student-choice research projects move important real-life issues into the school setting, an outcome of social action is to move students' real-life concerns beyond classroom walls. Taking social action re-quires students to become involved as members of a larger community.

Such a social action project was described in Powell, Cantrell, and Adams (2001). After learning that the highest peak in Kentucky was slated for strip mining, students became determined to save Black Mountain. Initially the students wanted simply to learn more about the mountain, to take an informed position. Through interviews with miners, mining company officials, and activists, they came to recognize the competing environmental and economic interests. They visited the mountain and took water samples from local wells. Eventually they took a more assertive role in trying to save the mountain. After raising thousands of dollars, they contacted local newspapers and television stations and held press conferences to raise public awareness. They submitted a 10-page proposal to a state agency with alternative recommendations and appeared before a subcommittee of the state legislature. In part through the students' efforts, a compromise solution was adopted by the state of Kentucky.

Of course, not all social action projects will have such a satisfactory result. Unsatisfactory results are hardly wasted efforts, though, as examination of why the effort was unsuccessful can draw attention to imbalances that may exist throughout the course of decision making. In either case, taking social action allows students to recognize literacy as a sociocultural process and to engage literacy as a vehicle for social change.

Integrating activities

Although for illustrative purposes the six categories described previously in this article have been presented as discrete, in many of the classroom practices, activities are merged so that students are engaged in two or more of the tasks. For example, Henry (2002) detailed a lesson on multiple viewpoints in which students read two versions of several fairy tales and completed compare/contrast diagrams for each pair (reading multiple texts). Students then rewrote a fairy

tale from the perspective of a different character or object within the tale (producing counter-texts). Bean and Moni (2003) described how reading the young adult novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* by Markus Zusak (2002, Push) (reading supplementary texts) can lead to discussion of subject-and-reader positioning, gaps and si-lences, and alternative representations (reading from a resistant perspective).

Wolk (2003) presented a generalized, multi-faceted strategy to teach for critical literacy that may involve adding fiction, nonfiction, and newspapers to the standard curriculum; connect-ing students' experiences and opinions to the subject matter; and using writing to foster criti-cal viewpoints. An example of such an approach was described by Schramm-Pate and Lussier (2003). In their article, the school textbook was augmented with readings from magazines, news-papers, and websites that discussed the removal of the Confederate flag from atop the South Carolina state house (reading supplementary texts). Students were encouraged to use literacy criticism and social science analysis to decon-struct texts (reading from a resistant perspec-tive). Students also debated, role-played, maintained journals, and composed essays to ex-amine how their own values affected their "read-ing" of texts (producing countertexts).

Classroom structures

If social justice and democracy are indeed goals of critical literacy, then we might expect not only classroom practices but also classroom structures to reflect those goals. Yet in almost every class-room practice reviewed, the hierarchical rela-tionship between teacher and student remained clearly defined, and decision making was almost always in the hands of the teacher. In the few in-stances when the student had some control of a decision (as in selecting a topic for research), it was within boundaries as prescribed and ap-proved by the teacher. Hanrahan (1999), for one, explicitly wanted to change the power relations

in the class. But having students keep journals hardly constitutes a revolutionary departure from the orthodoxy of teacher as boss—the stu-dents didn't have the choice of whether to keep a journal, they didn't get to pick the journal topic, and the teacher read and responded to the jour-nal entry (though journal entries are anony-mous). Students were even instructed what and how to write in their journals. Not evident in any of the classroom practices was a fully collabora-tive relationship between teacher and students as members of a learning community. Ironically, an authoritative rather than negotiated pedagogy (Morgan, 1997) appears to be a hallmark of criti-cal literacy instruction. Teachers and teacher ed-ucators must confront the question of whether any pedagogy that presumes a hierarchical rela-tionship between teacher and students truly sup-ports the development of critical inquiry.

Critical literacy in the content areas

Another question still to be resolved is how to move critical literacy beyond the language arts and social studies classrooms. What would it mean and what would it look like to be critically scientific, critically mathematical, or critically vocational? Critical approaches to literacy in any content area might include questions such as these:

- How does specific text content gain accept-ance and prominence?
- What counts as "true" within the discipline, and who makes that determination? Why?
- How do particular text genres gain accept-ance and prominence?
- What are considered "legitimate" modes of inquiry within the discipline?
- How do the content, genres, and modes of inquiry within a discipline affect the social relations of participants in the disciplinary community?

At the heart of critical literacy instruction in any content area is attention to the interrelationships of language, power, and text. To that end, the six categories of classroom practice described in this article may serve as springboards for local and creative adaptations.

Snapshots of current practice

While the examples of instruction presented in this review do not exhaust all possible approaches to critical literacy in the upper primary or secondary classroom, they do provide snapshots of current practice. Classroom literacy practices that involve students in reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, and producing countertexts all help develop an understanding that text is given meaning, as opposed to containing meaning. Such practices may lead students to recognize that reading and writing are necessarily interpretive events. On the other hand, classroom literacy practices that involve students in conducting student-choice research projects (to a lesser extent) and taking social action (to a greater extent) have the potential for affirming the role of reading and writing as "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1992, 2001). In this sense, reading and writing are not merely communicative acts but part of the habits, customs, and behaviors that shape social relations.

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