Connecting Practice and Research: Critical Literacy Guide

"Critical literacy ... points to providing students … with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, critical literacy can stress the need for students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical."

(Kretovics, 1985, in Shor, 1999).

What Is Critical Literacy?

Critical Literacy is a stance, mental posture, or emotional and intellectual attitude that readers, listeners, and viewers bring to bear as they interact with texts. Gee (2004) calls it "socially perceptive literacy." Luke (2004) asserts that critical literacy "involves second guessing, reading against the grain, asking hard and harder questions, seeing underneath, behind, and beyond texts, trying to see and 'call' how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, in whose interests."

Key Message
Critical literacy is a stance, a mental posture, or emotional and intellectual attitude.

"Text" traditionally referred to written material. The meaning is broadening to include, for example, media texts, oral text, and graphic text. In this sense, text is not synonymous with textbook.

Critical literacy has been traced to the work of Paulo Freire, who taught adult learners to "read the word" in order to "read the world," and to engage in a cycle of reflection and action (Luke, 2004; McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004; Shor, 1999). Additionally, John Dewey (Shor, 1999); Brian Cambourne (McLaughlin & 21), pervasive new technologies (Luke, 2004), and various literary theorists have challenged mainstream interpretations of texts and the notion that there is a singular or "correct" interpretation of any text.

Critical literacy goes beyond understanding literacy as a set of skills or practices. From a review of the literature, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002, in McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) identify the following principles of critical literacy:

- challenging common assumptions and values
- exploring multiple perspectives, and imagining those that are absent or silenced
- examining relationships, particularly those involving differences in power
- reflecting on and using literacy practices to take action for social justice.

Key Message
"Critical Literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action." (Freire, 1970)

The "text critic" component of Luke and Freebody's (2002) Four Resources model, which focuses on critical competence, suggests that students "critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral – that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people's ideas – and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways." Cervetti, Damico and Pardeles (2001) point out that "critical literacy involves a fundamentally different view of the text" in that critical literacy "[foregrounds] issues of power and attends explicitly to differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on. It places students and teachers in a questioning frame of mind that moves beyond didactic, factual learning to develop a critical consciousness that can lead to a search for justice and equity." It requires but is not synonymous with critical thinking.

Why Teach Critical Literacy?

Comber (2001) argues that being critically literate is not only central, but also necessary to being literate in a media-saturated, diverse world.

As such, critical literacy enhances and deepens comprehension, e.g., by requiring not only identification of persuasive techniques, but also analysis of how and to what degree the text maintains the status quo or perpetuates inequities. As David Pearson (2002) asserts, "comprehension is never enough: it must have a critical edge." (in McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004)

Critical literacy deepens understanding of ideas and information in all curricular areas, including language, environment, politics, science, health, economics, and history. Critical literacy involves understanding that readings of texts are shaped by the attitudes and values that readers bring to them, even as texts influence and 'construct' readers' responses.

As Green (2001) states: "The literate individual is someone who knows that there is more than one version available…" Critical literacy involves imagining multiple perspectives and possibilities and using literacy as an agent of social change.

How Can Critical Literacy Be Taught?

As Jennifer O'Brien (Luke, O'Brien and Comber, 2001) and Vivian Vasquez (1996) demonstrate, critical literacy is not to be reserved for older or academically proficient students, but can be taught even to primary students using all manner of texts. Strategies that can be used to develop a critically literate stance include the following:

- juxtaposing texts on a similar topic to highlight the range of possible perspectives, e.g., editorials from opposing points of view
- 'testing' texts against predictions to expose the assumptions informing those predictions, e.g., predicting a "fairy tale ending" for *The Paperbag Princess*
- examining or creating alternative endings in order to highlight their implicit values and societal expectations, e.g., comparing the two endings of *Great Expectations*
- using examples of texts from everyday life, such as toy advertisements and legal contracts to show that these "are not innocuous, neutral text(s) requiring simple decoding and response. They are key moments where social identity and power relations are established and negotiated." (Luke, O'Brien and Comber, 2001)
- Posing and teaching students to pose questions that problematize text and evoke thinking about issues of language, text, and power; providing students with sample critical questions, for example:
  - How is your understanding of the text influenced by your background?
  - How is the text influencing you, e.g., does the form of the text influence how you construct meaning?
  - How does the language in a text position you as reader, e.g., does the use of passive or active voice position you in a particular way?
  - What view of the world and what values does the text present?
  - What assumptions about your values and beliefs does the text make?
  - What perspectives are omitted?
  - Whose interests are served by the text?

Key Message

"…every day that we teach we in fact make choices; we make decisions about which texts, which messages, which values, and which attitudes we represent towards the truths of texts and discourses.

There is no magic method for literacy. There is no single or simple or unified approach to critical literacy….And that may be what sets approaches to critical literacy apart—they don't purport to provide a universal, incontestable, scientific answer about how to teach. Instead, they very deliberately open up a universe of possibilities, of possible critical readings, critical reading positions and practices." (Luke, 2004)

Who gets to ask questions, who gets to answer, and the kinds of questions asked are key. Gee (1989, in Green, 2001) argues that literacy is empowering "only when it renders [people] active questioners of the social reality around them." Strategies include:

- helping students understand that they can act with and/or against the text, e.g., by inquiring further into issues raised or by having students consider how the account might change if told from another's perspective. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) describe this as developing students' "power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author's topic."
- modeling a think-aloud that questions what the author is saying, disagrees, or speculates about the need for more information about what is read
- providing opportunities for students to reflect, draw on their own world view, and explore the implications of ideas for themselves and others.

Edelsky (1993) says that teachers can foster critical literacy by problematizing texts – "putting them up for grabs, for critical debate, for weighing, judging, critiquing" and looking at issues in their full complexity. Green (2001) argues that the relationship between student and text shifts when teachers "[reposition] students as researchers of language, and respect minority cultures' literacy practices." In general, teachers develop classroom climates and norms that help students learn how to:

- identify and assess their own response and relationship to the text
- analyze how texts have been constructed and how they influence audiences
- evaluate the validity and reliability of the text and its ostensible premises
- consider the social implications of the above, and take a moral stand on the kind of just society and democratic education we want. (Shor, 1999).

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Teachers can create conditions for fostering the kind of inquiry and discussion necessary for critical literacy for example:

- building a safe, inclusive classroom environment that promotes inquiry
- making available thought-provoking oral, print, electronic, and multi-media texts representing diverse perspectives
- developing understanding of students' interests, backgrounds and values, and honouring the strengths and literacies they bring to school
- providing a wide range of texts for students to read/view/hear, including texts from popular culture and "non-traditional classroom texts"
- acknowledging that some issues and discussions can be sensitive and uncomfortable for some students.

Key Message
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, and about who is advantaged by the way things are and who is disadvantaged." (Comber, 2001)

Approaches supporting effective literacy instruction are also helpful:

- encouraging students to access and connect to prior experience and knowledge, and recognizing how students' beliefs and values influence their understanding
- modeling and explicitly teaching wait time during discussions
- modeling and explicitly teaching respectful interactions and response norms
- encouraging all students to participate in discussions to avoid the dominance of a few
- modeling and providing students with opportunities to reflect on their thinking and inherent assumptions
- exploring alternative readings.

Implications for Teachers

Greene (2001) reminds us that teachers need a conscious awareness of their own understanding of language and language choices if they are to help students question and understand how language works and how literacy is used by individuals and groups for particular purposes, e.g., how the use of third person voice establishes authority and power.

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