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CRITICAL LITERACIES IN SCHOOLS: A PRIMER

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Readers and writers use a variety of modes of inscription – print, oral and multimedia – to understand, analyze, critique and transform their social, cultural and political worlds. Beginning from Freire (1970), 'critical literacy' has become a theoretically diverse educational project, drawing from reader response theory, linguistic and grammatical analysis from critical linguistics, feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and critical race theory, and cultural and media studies. In the UK, Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and the US different approaches to critical literacy have been developed in curriculum and schools. These focus on social and cultural analysis and on how print and digital texts and discourses work, with a necessary and delicate tension between classroom emphasis on student and community cultural 'voice' and social analysis – and on explicit engagement with the technical features and social uses of written and multimodal texts.

The term 'literacy' traditionally refers to the mastery of skills, processes and understandings in making meaning from and through written text. Literacy has been understood to be a fixed body of skills, or as an individual, internal capability – culturally neutral, universal in its features, and developmentally accessible. In the last two decades, this definition has been challenged by sociological and historical, anthropological and linguistic research on literacy in everyday life (Street, 2003). Literacies are used for a range of human expression and work, for everyday self-expression, identity formation, economic exchange, cultural engagement, religious experience, civic life, commerce, industry and leisure – taking on different designs and modalities, rituals and text practices, demands and expectations in diverse institutional sites and spaces. In response to the rapid expansion of new modes of information technology, definitions of literacy have necessarily expanded beyond print-based technologies to include engagement with texts in a range of semiotic forms: visual, aural, digital and multimodal (Sefton-Green, Nixon & Erstad, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Following Freire, critical literacies entail not only a reading of the word but also a 'reading of the world', processes of naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs and complexities (Mey, 1986), and developing the capacity to rewrite, redesign, and reshape it in communities' interests (New London Group, 1996). Language, texts and their discourse structures are more than neutral or factual representations of the world. Texts are a means for shaping and reshaping, construing and 'making' possible worlds in particular

normative directions with identifiable ideological interests and consequences for individuals and communities. Accordingly, critical literacy models have an explicit aim of developing useful, powerful mastery of texts to transform lived social relations and material conditions.

Models have been developed in large-scale national literacy campaigns in the Americas and Africa, informal and community education programs for women and migrants, adult and those in technical education, university literary and cultural studies, and teacher education (e.g., McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Janks, 2003; Pennycook, 2001). Our brief comments here focus on schools, where principles of critical literacy have been applied in the school curriculum areas of reading, writing, language arts, English and language education (e.g., Luke, 2000; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Vasquez, 2003). In schools, critical literacy approaches have a dual focus on: (1) a more equitable distribution of textual and discourse resources (in Fraser's (1997) terms, *redistributive justice*), and (2) the critique and remaking of ideology, cultural values and beliefs, political systems and material conditions (*recognitive justice*).

This is a short primer on foundational concepts and ongoing debates. We begin with a genealogy of the foundations of the 'critical' in education, then turning to two current approaches of critical literacy: critical pedagogy and text analytic models.

FOUNDATIONS

The term "critical" has a distinctive lineage in Western philosophy and science. It is derived from the Greek word "kriticos", referring to the ability to argue and judge. There is an ongoing tension between educational definitions: (1) that define the critical in terms of scientific rationality, deep thinking or problem solving, and those; (2) that focus on the critique of social life, material conditions and political ideology. Concepts of the critical as argument or rational judgment are not universal. Other cultural traditions have different genealogies': Mandarin, for example, has four different characters for the concept 'critical', emphasizing the seriousness or difficulty of phenomenon, or gravity of a situation.

Freire (1972) joins together numerous strands of Anglo/European social theory: dialectical materialist theories of history, the Marxist critique of political economy, phenomenological, existential and Judeo-Christian views of the 'self', Socratic and interactionist models of dialogue and exchange. Working with politically disenfranchised and economically marginalized rural communities in Brazil, he observed that conventional schooling was based on a "banking model" of education, where learners were, quite literally, filled with skills and knowledges that served dominant class interests. Knowledge and skills were *deposited* into

students, assuming that this would portably translate into convertible cultural capital. Traditional schooling, then, treated learners' lives, cultures and knowledge as *tabula rasa*, with only official school and teacher knowledge granted value and power. In its place, Freire advocated a dialogical approach to literacy based on principles of reciprocal and dialectical exchange. These would reconcile and 'negate' (following Hegel and Marx) binary relationships of oppressed and oppressor, teacher and learner. In "cultural circles", students would begin from a facilitated analysis of their own material and cultural contexts, community problems and aspirations. The acquisition of literacy thus entailed a process of naming and renaming, narrating and analyzing life worlds. Accordingly, Freire's work focuses literacy educators on the necessary transitivity of reading, writing and other systems of textual representation: that they are always about substantive lives and material realities. "Reading [and writing] the word" entails "reading [and rewriting] the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Current educational practice also draws from British cultural studies (cf. Hammer & Kellner, 2009). The field began from an analysis of the culture and education of the industrial working class. Hoggart (1957) and Williams (1958) described the power of postwar mass culture in the formation of ideology and hegemony. Their focus on the effects of consumption, mass and popular cultures grounds a key strand of critical literacy curricula: (1) the expansion of the textual and cultural objects beyond canonical scientific and literary texts to include texts of everyday life; (2) a focus on critical literacy as a "counter-hegemonic" form of critique that might, in turn, (3) enable a defense and revoicing of postwar British working class culture. The education of the working class became the pivotal question in the development of UK curriculum theory and the ongoing debate over how to more equitably reshape English teaching (e.g., Rosen, 1974; Bernstein, 1977). There are ongoing disputes over whether to emphasise the opening of schooling to working class "voice" and critique or to emphasise more equitable direct instruction dominant texts, skills and knowledges – *pace* the recognitive versus redistributive justice distinction above, and the major US debate on the value of progressivism/skills for African-American students (Delpit, 1990).

Poststructuralist models of text and discourse are further major philosophical influences on current approaches. There are major critiques of Freire's reliance on binary opposition (e.g., "oppressor/oppressed", teacher/student, monologue/dialogue) (Luke & Gore, 1993) and its lack of an elaborated developmental model of text and language (Pennycook, 2001). A central tenet of 1980s poststructuralist thought was that binary/dialectical opposition – like the models used by Freire - had the potential to obscure the complexity of social and cultural phenomenon. A second insight, from Foucault (1971; 1977) was that versions of social and material reality are built and shaped through linguistic categorization, taxonomies and hierarchies. Through discourses and representational

techniques, objects are named, analyzed, catalogued, and then marked for disciplining, change or re-definition. These concepts correspond with Freire's focus on the significance of the glossification, or "naming" of the world in literacy education. Augmented by Derrida's (1989) analysis of the contingency and indeterminancy of "text", and his argument that text itself was constituted through the interaction of 'difference' – poststructuralist theory provided ways for questioning and critiquing the "canon" of literacy education, and for new approaches of text analysis and critique.

These foundational tenets feature in critical literacy models: (1) a focus on ideology critique and cultural analysis as a key element of education against cultural domination and marginalization; (2) a commitment to the inclusion of working class, cultural and linguistic minorities, Indigenous learners, girls and women marginalized and disenfranchised by schooling; (3) an engagement with the significance of text, ideology and discourse in social and material relations, everyday cultural and political life.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONY

There is an extensive literature that extends Freire's principles and approaches in a broad project of "critical pedagogy" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Darder, 1991). Debates over this model have marked out diverse theoretical lines of development (e.g., feminist poststructuralism, critical race theory, postmodern cultural theory, postcolonialism). Developments in critical pedagogy have been in response to new social movements, new conditions of capitalism and political economy, and the emergence of new technologies (e.g., Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997). They also reflect several decades of practical work at bringing critical literacy into communities, schools and classrooms.

Freire's work begins from a classical view of ideology: that ruling class ideology dominates what counts as school knowledge. By this view, approaches to school literacy are represented as expressions of dominant ideology that succeed in creating a literacy that is principally 'receptive'. Being literate, then, involves uncritical transmission, decoding and reproduction of dominant and potentially distorted views of the world. The alternative is to begin from learners' key problems, worldviews and 'namings' of the phenomenal world, in effect turning learners into teachers and inventors of the curriculum. The process enables a 'renaming' of the world, a decoding and recoding of meaning. The focus of such an approach is on students' engaging in forms of ideology critique: exposing, second guessing and reconstructing dominant versions of the world provided in literature, literacy textbooks and everyday texts and interaction (Shor, 1987). To varying degrees, this orientation runs through all approaches to critical literacy, but it features strongly in explicitly political approaches to "critical pedagogy" (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren & Peters, 1995).

The explicit focus on critical analyses of competing state ideologies and economic conditions is central to literacy campaigns initiated by Freire and colleagues in Mozambique (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987) and it remains the focus of current efforts at an explicitly political pedagogy in countries like Venezuela, Peru and Mexico (e.g., McLaren, 1998). There the analysis of the effects of colonialism, imperialism, class division, and unequal economic relations is a principal theme of literacy instruction. These models of "radical pedagogy" and "critical pedagogy" involve students in a normative and revolutionary social analysis. In Freirian terms, this entails working with learners to use language to name and 'problematize' the world – that is to take everyday ideological constructions of social relations, of class, race, and gender relations, and to question them through reading, writing and dialogue. In such a setting traditional authority and epistemic knowledge relations of teachers and students are shifted: with learners becoming teachers of their everyday understandings and experiences, and teachers becoming learners of these same contexts. This might entail setting open conditions of exchange by establishing a cultural circle amongst adult learners (Shor, 1990).

In school classrooms, it requires democratic conditions where authentic exchange can occur around issues of moral, social and cultural significance (Harste, 1988). Such approaches to critical literacy, therefore, assume basic tenets of Gramscian models of hegemony and Marxist ideology critique: that dominant cultural texts and messages can be 'de-naturalised'; that is, their taken-for-granted status and common sense assumptions can be questioned and held up for scrutiny. Such processes work to enable students to explore and find other 'truths' and 'voices' about social and class relations, about forms of oppression, and about injustices of the social and economic system.

Practical approaches to critical literacy advocated in US schools that call on these assumptions, start from a focus on community relations or political or cultural events, moving towards agentive, alternative analyses (e.g., Vasquez, 2004; Wink, 1997). In schools and universities, these approaches also focus on students reading and writing to engage in forms of community study, the analysis of social movements, and political activism (e.g, Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007). Drawing from cultural studies, it also has involved development of a critical "media literacy", focusing on the analysis of popular cultural texts including advertising, news, broadcast media and the internet (e.g., Kellner, 1995). Finally, there is a broad focus in these models on the development of revisionist versions of history and curriculum, altering dominant descriptions of national history, colonialism and political history and processes (Nieto et al. 2008).

The critiques raised by poststructuralist feminists have had a major impact on critical pedagogy. Especially in Australia and Canada, approaches to school reading entail a critique of textual, visual and media representations of women and girls as ideological and patriarchal, that is,

as projecting dominant constructions of gender and sexuality (Davies, 2004; Gilbert, 1994) and inequitable patterns of face-to-face interaction (Ellsworth, 1989). Second wave feminism yielded a stronger critique of grand narratives of scientific and philosophical understandings of 'mankind' and science (e.g., Threadgold, 1997); that is, a critique of gendered discourse and of the privileging of canonical masculine knowledge and voice. Relatedly, third wave feminism led to a strong focus on 'standpoint' and agency in theory; this includes a critique of critical pedagogy itself as a potential form of patriarchal practice (Ellsworth, 1989; Luke & Gore, 1991).

A parallel development drawing upon postcolonial and critical race theory has been a renewed stress on issues of 'voice' in the classroom, and an orientation towards representation of identity. Historically marginalized groups have worked to stake a claim for an approach that both entails political ideology critique, and also set the grounds for a strong focus on the significance of ethnic and minority cultures and subcultures. American approaches to critical literacy have developed a strong focus on the 'politics of voice' (Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007), on building interaction and textual focus around the distinctive cultural histories, identities and contexts faced by groups marginalized on the basis of gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation. A critical approach to language and literacy education requires the setting of culturally appropriate and generative contexts for enactment of cultural identity and solidarity (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Albright & Luke, 2008). It extends a focus of critique on the state and political economy to examine 'grand narratives' and the everyday practices of patriarchy, racism and sexism. There the enhancement of 'voice', 'speaking position' and 'standpoint' become central pedagogical foci, with the assumption that these can be translated into forms of self-determination, agency and social movement (e.g., hooks, 1992; Darder, 2002).

TEXT ANALYSIS APPROACHES

Research on the cultural and social, cognitive and linguistic contexts of literacy (e.g., Street, 1994) raises two substantive educational challenges for critical pedagogy approaches. First, though based on historical dialectics, there are largely synchronic, without a broader template for the incremental developmental acquisition and diverse cultural uses of literacy. The acquisition of language, text and discourse requires the developmental engagement with levels of linguistic and discourse complexity (e.g., Lemke, 1998). While Freirian models provide a pedagogical approach and a political stance, an orientation towards 'voice' and ideology, they lack specificity in terms of how teachers and students can engage with the complex structures of texts, both traditional and multimodal. Later models of critical literacy, particularly those developed in Australia, attempt to come to grips with these key theoretical and

practical issues by focusing on grammatical and semantic models of text analysis.

An initial major critique of critical pedagogy approaches was that it overlooked the pressing need for students to master a range of textual genres, including those scientific forms that constitute powerful understandings of the physical and material world (Halliday & Martin, 1993). According to systemic functional linguists (Halliday, 1994), the mastery of genre entails a grasp of the social elements of lexical and syntactic function, and an understanding of the social relationships of these with affiliated discourses and ideologies (Hasan & Williams, 1996). It involves a socio cultural understanding of text and context, purpose, audience and use (Halliday, 1978). So a functional approach to text analysis treats its purpose as the study of language-in-use rather than language or individual skill *per se*. Here the focus is on equitable access to textual practices as an essential component to redistributive social justice. The premise is this cannot realistically be achieved through foci on 'voice', ideology critique, and sociopolitical analysis *per se*. This affiliated approach to critical literacy, then, argues for explicit instruction and direct access to "Secret English" and "genres of power" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

Text-analytic approaches to critical literacy are based upon critical discourse analysis, an explicitly political derivative of systemic functional linguistics (Fairclough, 2001; Luke, 1996b). Bringing together ideology critique with an explicit instructional focus on teaching how texts work ideologically, Fairclough (1992) argues for the teaching of "critical language awareness". This entails teaching students the analysis of a range of texts – proceedural, academic, literary – attending to their lexico-grammatical structure, their ideological contents and discourses, and their conditions of production and use. Critical linguistics makes broad distinctions between ideological formations in texts (field: representational function or ideational meanings), their social functions (tenor: interactional functions or interpersonal meanings) and their distinctive generic and modal features (mode: information flow functions or textual meanings). This enables teachers and students to focus on what texts say, that is, how words, grammar, textual and discourse choices shape a representation or 'version' of the material, natural and sociopolitical worlds. It also enables a focus on what texts 'do', that is, how words and grammar bid to establish relations of power between authors and readers, speakers and addressees, designers and digital text users.

Critical literacy – by this account – entails the developmental engagement with the major texts, discourses and modes of information in the culture. It attempts to attend to the ideological and hegemonic functions of texts, just as in critical pedagogy models. But it augments this by providing students with technical resources for analyzing how texts work, and how they might be otherwise represented by both authors and readers in a process of redesign. In practice, this might entail the analysis of a textbook

or media representation of cultural, political or economic life. In addition to these linguistically based approaches to critical literacy, the direct application of feminist, postcolonial and poststructruralist deconstructive models of reading and literature have been adopted in some secondary school literature classrooms (Mellor & Patterson, 1996). Models based on 'deconstruction' have emphasized the study of exclusion, silence and omission in texts (Morgan, 1997).

Though not mutually exclusive, critical pedagogy approaches differ from text analytic approaches. While the former has focused on the significance of student experience, lifeworlds and speaking position and on the power of dominant ideology – the latter focuses on texts as mechanisms of power and knowledge, as semiotic technologies for constructing the world and for positioning readers in relationship to the world. While critical pedagogy focuses on dialogic interaction, text analytic models entail the introduction of specific ways of analyzing, parsing and constructing texts. These approaches to critical literacy have proven durable, with strong uptake in East Asian and other education systems as well as within the Western world.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

New social, cultural and economic conditions have arisen. Freire's approach to literacy was the product of a particular set of historical material and political contexts, a landmark statement in 'point-of-decolonization' educational philosophy. While the Freirian model was based on binary analyses of "oppressed" and "oppressors" of industrializing states and emergent economies – late capitalist and globalised systems feature more complex economic and political forces, with the emergence of dynamic new forms of solidarity and identity based upon new material and technological conditions, political coalitions and social movements (Castells, 1999).

The major shifts in the semiotic modes of representation have enabled the invention of new literacies entailed in the new digital technologies and affiliated youth and industrial/professional cultures (New London Group, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005; Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Sefton-Green, Nixon & Erstad, 2009). Digital culture sits within a complex, emergent political economic order that, for many learners and adults, sits well beyond comprehension and critique (Graham & Luke, in press/2009). The emergence of new literacies and cultures has been complicated further by the current economic crisis - itself a new phenomena for naming, description, analysis and critique (Luke, Graham & Luke, 2007). This will require a new vocabulary to describe, analyse and, indeed, critique current economic structures, trends and phenomena.

Literacy educators and researchers are caught in response to current test-driven approaches to school reform. A key effect of these policies is, *inter*

alia, to reinforce definitions of literacy as a neutral, individual cognitive skill – as access to a literary and scientific canon that, for many learners, remains beyond criticism. Critical literacy offers an important strategic, practical alternative for teachers and students to reconnect literacy with everyday life, and with an education that entails debate, argument, and action over social, cultural and economic issues that matter. It is not a unified or single method or approach. Instead, it consists of a family of approaches to the teaching and learning about cultures and societies, texts and discourses. Though they differ in philosophic assumptions and pedagogic emphases, they share a commitment to the use of literacy for purposes of equity and social justice. They aim for nothing less than readers, writers, listeners and viewers who have a cogent, articulated and relevant understandings of texts, their techniques, their investments and their consequences – and who are able to use these understandings and capacities to act mindfully and justly to change their worlds.

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