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# What is Critical Literacy?

Ira Shor, College of Staten Island

## Introduction

We are what we say and do. The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us. That world addresses us to produce the different identities we carry forward in life: men are addressed differently than are women, people of color differently than whites, elite students differently than those from working families. Yet, though language is fateful in teaching us what kind of people to become and what kind of society to make, discourse is not destiny. We can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects. This is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane.

Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development. This kind of literacy--words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society--connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. Critical literacy, then, is an attitude towards history, as Kenneth Burke (1984) might have said, or a dream of a new society against the power now in power, as Paulo Freire proposed (Shor and Freire, 1987), or an insurrection of subjugated knowledges, in the ideas of Michel Foucault (1980), or a counter-hegemonic structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams (1977) theorized, or a multicultural resistance invented on the borders of crossing identities, as Gloria Anzaldua (1990) imagined, or language used against fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, as Adrienne Rich (1979) declared.

From this perspective, *literacy* is understood as social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture, while *critical literacy* is understood as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson and Irvine, 82). Consequently, my opening question, "What is critical literacy?," leads me to ask, "How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter? If language use is one social force constructing us ('symbolic action' as Kenneth Burke, 1966, argued), how can we use and teach oppositional discourses so as to remake ourselves and our culture?"

Essentially, then, critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. All of us grow up and live in local cultures set in global contexts where multiple discourses shape us. Neighborhood life and schooling are two formidable sites where the local and the global converge. In my case, until I left home for an elite university in 1962, I grew up in a Jewish working-class neighborhood in the South Bronx of New York City. In this treeless, teeming area, moms and dads held steady jobs but always spoke of needing money; chimneys coughed out garbage smoke daily yet few people complained; abundant ethnic food with names like "kishke" and "kugel" were occasions for passionate conviviality in kitchens filled with talk and stories; Eastern European accents were common and sometimes ridiculed, while non-Standard English was typical even among the native-born; televisions were always on and newspapers were delivered daily to our doors, teaching us the world beyond the neighborhood; and the N-word was spoken casually on gray blocks where only whites lived and only whites operated the small stores (except for one Asian family that slept and cooked in the back room of the Chinese laundry run by a mom and a dad who spoke little English, unlike the African-Americans I heard who had lots of English but no stores).

In that alleged Golden Age, black families and their own English were quarantined across the Bronx River Parkway in a housing project built in 1953 along with a junior high that straddled the racial border and became home to gangs divided by color and ethnicity. My first September day there in 1957 was made memorable by seeing a knife fight at dismissal time. For the next two years, I never went to the bathroom in that building. This was a coming attraction for the even more aggressive senior high nearby, which could have been the set for "Blackboard Jungle," a famous urban flick in that decade.

Like many American places then and now across the country, these gritty streets were a suburb of Hollywood. We kids went weekly to the local Skouras movie house under the roaring Pelham Bay el, paid 40 cents to see a John Wayne cowboy or war saga along with 20 cartoons, and devoured teeth-destroying candy, like a chocolate treat we called "nigger babies." It was a time when John D. Rockefeller's grandson Nelson first ran for Governor of New York, and my young ears noticed a change in one of my favorite jingles--Chock Full of Nuts, the heavenly coffee, stopped saying that "better coffee Rockefeller's money can't buy" and suddenly crooned that "better coffee a millionaire's money can't buy." Could such a change help the famous grandson get elected? Were words that important?

Rockefeller took the state house in Albany while I was in junior high, but before I got to that gang-divided territory and the accelerated "special progress" section that creamed off the most scholastic working-class kids, I patiently made my way up the "one" track in my all-white elementary school (1-1, 2-1, 3-1, 4-1, etc.) set aside for supposedly "smart" kids who were being divided from their "ordinary" peers very early in life. I soon learned that

a handful of chosen white working-class kids were supposed to leave the others behind, which I happily did with the push of my mother who insisted I stop cursing like my friends and speak proper English ("he doesn't" not "he don't").

Racially, in the desegregation 1950s, my elementary school changed ever so slightly when a single perfect black girl mysteriously appeared--Olivia was her name. One day, our third grade teacher asked us how many of our fathers went to work in suits and ties. Few hands went up, not mine or Olivia's. The teacher's question confused and embarrassed me because my dad--a sheet-metal worker and high-school drop-out--wore his only suit for special occasions, perhaps as did Olivia's father. Suits in my neighborhood were for bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, lodge gatherings, high holidays, or union meetings. The teacher's question that morning invited me to be ashamed of my family and our clothes which, like our thick urban accents and bad table manners, marked us as socially inferior, despite the white skin which gave us some decisive privileges over Olivia's family, such as my dad's union wages, living on the 'better' side of the Parkway, segregated classes for us white kids in junior high (internal tracking), and moms who could hire black cleaning ladies on Saturdays while they went off to the local beauty parlors to get a perm.

Perms were a small weekly luxury in this neighborhood, where suits, 'proper' English, and good table manners were rare. Still, I did see in those days a grownup wearing a tie and jacket to work--the elementary school principal. One morning, this suit called me to his office to let me know he was banning the little school newspaper I had started with my best friend Barry. (We called it "The Spirit of '93" to play on "the spirit of '76" we had read about vis a vis the American Revolution, and to honor our public school that had a number but no name.) When the principal abruptly ended our literate venture, I learned that 11-year-olds in our democracy can't publish a paper without prior official approval. The suit's word was power and law. Our kid's word vanished.

Thirty years later, unfortunately, the Supreme Court confirmed the right of public schools to censor student publications, in the Hazelwood decision. More recently, my memory of childhood censorship was stirred again when a New Jersey principal stopped my colleague Maria Sweeney's class from performing its original anti-sweatshop play (Nieves, 1997; Karp, 1997). The suit this time was worn by a female who suggested that fifth-graders can't really understand such issues as sweatshops, and besides, the kids weren't being fair to Nike and Disney. Maria with some parents and theater professionals stood by the 11-year-olds and their script, which the kids eventually performed onstage in Manhattan, so there was a happy ending to this story.

I could have used Maria Sweeney and activist parents in the '50s. Students of all ages need adult coalitions to help them win language rights to free speech and to social criticism (the presidents at two City University of New York campuses recently nullified student government elections when dissident slates won). Adult support can keep

restrictive authorities at bay, not only when a Broadway cause celebre erupts like the sweatshop play, but also for the low-profile, everyday forms of silencing that researchers like John Goodlad (1983) and Michelle Fine (1987, 1993) found in mass schooling. Administrative rule-making and top-down curricula mean that authority is unilateral not democratic, featuring standardized tests, commercial textbooks, mandated syllabi, one-way teacher-talk, and fill-in-the-blank exams. As teachers well know, silenced students find ways to make lots of noise, in the unofficial spaces of halls, toilets, lunchrooms, yards, and streets, as well as during class when teachers attempt their lesson plans. At many sites of mass education including public colleges, a culture war of discourses is apparently underway. In wars of words, can language and literacy be innocent? Can education be neutral?

### **Innocent or Neutral? Literacy and Pedagogy**

If language and education were non-partisan, I suppose my school principal would have allowed the "Spirit of '93" to circulate in the building. (Why didn't he campaign against the circulation of the N-word among us kids and our parents?) If words and schooling were free from conventional politics, I suppose Maria's class would have been able to perform its sweatshop play for classes at their Jersey school instead of crossing the Hudson River to do an exile gig. (Why didn't their principal support the campaign against sweatshop apparel instead of declaring the students unfair to corporate America?) All in all, if classroom discourse was not partisan, this nation's schools and colleges would display different stories than the conflicted accounts rendered by various scholars (Ravitch, 1974, 1983; Karabel and Brint, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Berliner and Biddle, 1995). Consider, for example, the case of the Boston authorities in 1826, who decided to open an all-girls high school to match the all-boys one started a few years earlier. So many girls applied that the brahmin city fathers chose to kill the project rather than to meet the demand for female equality. For the time being, patriarchy was protected. If education were indeed neutral, boys and girls of all colors and classes would have had equal access as well as equal monies invested in their development, something this democratic nation never provided and still doesn't (*Quality Counts*, 20-21, 54). Racially, in fact, schools have become resegregated since the 1954 decision, according to recent studies (Orfield, 1993; Orfield and Easton, 1996; Orfield, et.al., 1997).

While segregation and unequal funding remain fixtures in American education, a partisan inequality rules daily life as well. For example, the Hunger Action Network and Food First group estimate that 5 million senior citizens and upwards of 4 million children go to bed hungry every day in this food-rich country (Lieberman, 1998). Can anyone doubt that hungry students are at a disadvantage in the classroom? The response of a humane society would be to simply feed everyone with the vast food surplus already available, but distribution in a market-driven society is based on income, not need. ("Marketplace"

on National Public Radio for June 25, 1998 reported a "problem" for farmers in the Northwest--"too much wheat and too few customers.") This sorry saga of separating hungry kids from plentiful food includes a bizarre attempt during the Reagan Administration to declare ketchup a vegetable to save money on school lunch programs. You don't need a PhD to know that ketchup is a condiment and not a vegetable, but such irrational claims mark conservative politics in recent decades (Bracey, 1994). When it comes to the disgraceful fact of hungry kids in a food-rich nation, all we can claim for critical literacy is that this discourse and pedagogy is food for thought and feeling (symbolic nourishment), not real calories needed by real people. Critical education cannot feed the hungry or raise the minimum wage; it can only invite people into action to achieve these and other humane goals. The moral core of critical literacy, then, should be put in high profile, especially in the wealthy U.S., where General Electric reported a record \$8.2 billion profit (Smart, 1998) and General Motors sits on \$14 billion in cash (Moody, 1998). The consequences of corporate power make it necessary for dissidents to say the obvious: Real food must be guaranteed each child to support her or his academic learning.

Food-rich America has the highest child poverty rate in the industrialized world, 20.8% (*Statistical Abstract*, Table 739, 1997). Here, black and Hispanic kids are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as are white kids (*Statistical Abstract*, Table 737, 1997). Conversely, in a high-tech age, white students are three times more likely to have computers at home than are black or Hispanic youth (*Technology Counts*, 1997; Zehr, 1998). A child whose parents earn

\$70,000 or more (top quartile) has an 80% chance to graduate college by age 24, while a child whose family earns \$22,000 or less (bottom quartile) has about an 8% chance (Mortenson, 1995; Viadero, 1998). White median family income is about \$41,000, remarkably higher than that of blacks (\$24,698) or Hispanics (\$24,318), indicating that white supremacy is still firmly in the saddle (*Statistical Abstract*, Table No. 727, 1997). Education and literacy are situated in these larger conditions, where the economy is the "decisive" factor influencing school policy and outcomes, as John Kenneth Galbraith (1967) suggested some time ago.

The good news is that from 1970s to mid-1980s, black students substantially narrowed test score gaps between them and their white peers (*Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 128, 1997; Williams and Ceci, 1997). The bad news is that these gains slowed or stopped by the 1990s, as economic and educational policies that increased inequality gained momentum (*Quality Counts*, 10-13). Further, black unemployment has remained about twice the white rate, virtually unchanged through boom and bust periods (*Statistical Abstract*, Table 656, 1997), despite the black achievement of near-parity with whites in average levels of education (*Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 8, 1997). Similarly, the income advantage of white families over minority households mentioned above has also

remained steady during this recent period of improving non-white educational achievement (Henwood, 1997). Additionally, in higher education, black and Hispanic graduation rates severely lag white student rates despite a notable narrowing of the racial gap in high school completion and test scores (Gose, 1998). Further, in higher education, only 3% of full professors are black and only 2% of all faculty are Hispanic (Schneider, 1998a). While the racial gap in wages has not narrowed, inner cities have become more segregated and minority families there more impoverished and isolated (*Quality Counts*, 14-15; Anyon, 1998).

Like black students' test score gains, females made historic advances in college attendance and degrees, yet have not been able to translate their higher credentials into wage parity. As the Department of Education (1996) noted, "despite large gains in educational attainment and labor force participation, significant differences in earnings persist between females and males, even at similar levels of education" (18). Female high school grads earn about a third less than male grads the same age; female college grads earn about 80% of what their male counterparts receive. Further, women are not getting PhDs in the high-paying fields of science and technology still dominated by white men, who also continue to dominate the high-salaried professions of medicine and law. Instead, women collect in low-wage doctorates and 'helping' professions such as education, social work, and library science (*Digest of Education Statistics*, Tables 272, 299- 304, 1997). Finally, women hold only 18% of high-wage full professorships but about 70% of low-salary schoolteacher jobs (Schneider, 1998a).

Besides the race and gender divides, mass education has also not equalized the widening gaps between social classes (Hershey, 1996; Perez-Pena, 1997). People of all colors and genders have gained more educational credentials every decade, yet the bottom 80% of wage-earners saw no growth in their share of national income since the 1970s while the top 20% take home higher wages (Holmes, 1996; "Wealthiest Americans," *New York Times*, 1997). In a single year, 1996- 1997, the number of billionaires in the U.S. increased from 135 to 170, according to Forbes magazine's annual report on the richest Americans (Sklar and Collins, 1997). The top 1% now control about 40% of the country's wealth, the highest percentage in our history, even though high-school diplomas and college degrees are more widely distributed today than ever (Boutwell, 1997). What Lester Faigley (1997) called "the revolution of the rich" means that class inequity is growing, not declining, at a moment when mass education is at its greatest reach.

Such inequities in school and society have been constant sources of critique as well as conflict. For example, Christopher Jencks (1972) concluded in a landmark study that progress towards equality would be at the speed of *glaciers* [his metaphor], if we depended on education to level disparities. What would move equality faster? Jencks proposed reducing wage differences and rotating jobs within occupations to give all people access to all competencies in a field or industry. An income/employment policy

plus progressive taxation to redistribute wealth would be far swifter equity mechanisms than mass education, he argued, because they would directly create more wages from the bottom up. A quarter of a century later, Jencks's analysis still holds, I would say, insofar as economic inequality is the primary problem needing change to build community foundations for school achievement (Anyon, 1998; Mickelson and Smith, 1998).

All in all, perhaps these are a few good reasons to question the status quo, including the myth of education as a "great equalizer" (Horace Mann's hope, discussed further shortly). Critical literacy is a pedagogy for those teachers and students morally disturbed by the above "savage inequalities" as Jonathan Kozol (1991) named them, for those who wish to act against the violence of imposed hierarchy and forced hunger.

## **Literacy for Equity: Transforming Words in the World**

In many ways, the project of critical literacy fits the savage and contentious time in which it emerged. In recent decades, America has been moving left and right at the same time though not in the same way or at the same speed, I would say. In this long period of polarization, when the liberal "center" declined dramatically, Democrats and Republicans virtually fused on the right.

Humane hope has resided in challenges to inequality made on various fronts of the left--challenges which have been met by powerful reactionary efforts to maintain tradition and privilege (Faludi, 1991; Ingalls, 1998; Morris, 1998; Shepard, 1998). To state the obvious, the past thirty years have witnessed monumental culture wars in school and society over gender, race, class, and sexual preference. Since the 1960s, these culture wars--a long-term questioning of the unequal status quo--have disturbed traditional language arts (phonics, the 5-paragraph essay, and grammar drills) and mainstream discourse (like the practice of only using the masculine pronoun "he" to refer to people in general). A familiar response to egalitarian pressures from below has been the "political correctness" campaign and other conservative education projects which have attempted to turn back the clock through various school policies: career education, back-to-basics, the literacy crisis, steep tuition increases, public sector budget cuts, more standardized testing at all levels, restrictions on open access to higher education, "cultural literacy" proposals steeped in Eurocentric facts and didactic lecturing (Hirsch, 1987, 1989; Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 1988), and "bell curve" arguments justifying the subordination of minorities (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Gould, 1995; Williams and Ceci, 1997). This counter-offensive to defend the status quo--which I call "the conservative restoration" against the democratic opening of the 1960s (see *Culture Wars*)--included corporate conglomeration of the mass media as well as high-profile attempts to muzzle criticism, such as progressive Jim Hightower's removal from national talk-radio, *Time* magazine's refusal to run essays on welfare reform, militarism, and the death penalty by its own columnist Barbara Ehrenreich, Oprah Winfrey's famous 'free speech' beef case in Texas, and the industry lawsuit against Cornell researcher Prof. Kate Bronfenbrenner who



publicly criticized labor-law violations of Beverly Enterprises, a health-care provider. The broad defense of the status quo also brought attacks on affirmative action (begun in earnest with the 1978 Bakke case in California; see Sandman, 1998, and Hill, 1998, for more recent events); on welfare (epitomized by the punitive "W-2" program in Wisconsin and cheap-labor "workfare" in New York; see Coniff, 1998, on the "mirage" of welfare reform and Gordon, 1994, on "how welfare became a dirty word"); on labor unions (like the 1998 corporate attempt to end labor financing of political campaigns through Proposition 226 in California); on abortion rights (restrictive access sanctioned by the Supreme Court; shooting of doctors, murders and bombings at clinics); on school-equity (the refusal of states like New Jersey and Texas to equalize student funding despite three decades of lawsuits and one court order after another); and on gay rights (like the banning of Indigo Girls from some high school concerts because of their lesbian identification, Strauss, 1998, and the attempt to drive Terrence McNally's new play *Corpus Christi* out of the Manhattan Theater Club, Blumenthal, 1998).

In this embattled period, when the status quo mobilized to defend tradition and hierarchy, culture wars have been particularly sharp in the field of English. Consider the bitter conflict fought by Linda Brodkey (1996) at Austin when she tried to redesign freshman comp with diversity issues; Maxine Hairston's (1992a) denunciation of critical theorists in composition and the responses it provoked; the growing dispute between entrenched literary study and subordinated writing instruction (the "comp-lit split," Schneider, 1998b); the rescue of the SAT as a tool for measuring literacy despite 20 years of criticism against its cultural bias (Weissglass, 1998); and the long-term contention between phonics and whole-language (Daniels, Zemelman, and Bikar, 1998). The specific area of culture wars which I address in this essay involves literacy and pedagogy in writing instruction. What methods help develop students as critically thinking citizens who use language to question knowledge, experience, and power in society? This social context for education joins a long discussion dating back to John Dewey and in some ways to Horace Mann before him.

## **Looking Back: Reform and Reformers**

In the year John Dewey was born in Vermont, 1859, an ailing 63-year-old Horace Mann delivered his final commencement address as President of Antioch, which he had helped found six years earlier as the first co-ed college in the country (also admitting blacks as well as whites, though Oberlin broke the race barrier a decade before). Mann, known as the Father of the Common School for his prodigious efforts to set up free public schooling in Massachusetts from 1837-1849, had helped rescue Antioch from near-bankruptcy soon after it opened (Williams, 1937). Now, on a June day in Ohio, he ended his last address with an extraordinary call to students, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." A zealous reformer, he succumbed to illness that August, ending a controversial career devoted to mass education which he hoped, in part,

would solve growing class divisions in 19th century America. If education remained private, Mann thought, "Intellectual castes would inevitably be followed by castes in privilege, in honor, in property" (Williams, 188).

Dewey, more secular than Mann, argued in *Democracy and Education* (1916) that the curricular split between elite and mass education was passed down from the class divisions of ancient Greece, where leisured rulers could study philosophy and evade useful labor, supported by the majority who were marked inferior precisely because they worked with their hands. Subject matters dealing with utility and labor were deemed lesser than those relating to philosophy. Dewey thus saw the new mass curriculum of his time (the three R's and job-training) deriving from class inequities, where the study of abstract liberal arts remained a leisure class privilege while basic skills and occupationalism were relegated to society's subordinates: "The idea still prevails that a truly cultural or liberal education cannot have anything in common, directly at least, with industrial affairs, and that the education which is fit for the masses must be a useful or practical education in a sense which opposes useful and practical to nurture of appreciation and liberation of thought...The notion that the 'essentials' of elementary education are the three R's, mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals" (*Democracy and Education*, 257, 192). Education separated from experience and usefulness on the one hand, and from philosophy on the other, was a dead-end for learning in a democracy, he argued. Dewey thus affirmed a holistic curriculum based simultaneously in experience and philosophy, in working and thinking, in action and reflection.

Accordingly, from such an integrated curriculum, Deweyan education seeks the construction of a reflective democratic citizen. In this curriculum, the class-based division between the ideal and the real, the liberal arts and the vocations, is collapsed into a unified learning field. Language use in such an egalitarian field is the vehicle for making knowledge and for nurturing democratic citizens through a philosophical approach to experience. For Dewey, language use is a social activity where theory and experience meet for the discovery of meaning and purpose. In this curricular theory and practice, discourse in school is not a one-way, teacher-centered conduit of class-restricted materials while "language arts" is not a separate subject for the transfer of correct usage or grammar skills to students. "Think of the absurdity of having to teach language as a thing by itself," Dewey proposed in *The School and Society* (1900). To him, children are born language-users, naturally and eagerly talking about the things they do and are interested in. "But when there are no vital interests appealed to in the school," he continued, when language is used simply for the repetition of lessons, it is not surprising that one of the chief difficulties of school work has come to be instruction in the mother-tongue. Since the language taught is unnatural, not growing out of the real desire to communicate vital impressions and convictions, the freedom of children in its use gradually disappears. (*The School and Society*, 55-56)

With vital interests disconnected from classroom discourse, the students lose touch with the purpose of human communication. When they lose touch with purpose in speaking or writing, they struggle to mobilize their inherent language competencies. They lose their articulateness along with their motivation, Dewey suggested, compelling the teacher "to invent all kinds of devices to assist in getting any spontaneous and full use of speech" (56).

Dewey's hundred-year old observations remain relevant today for the ongoing campaign against drilling in grammar and rhetorical forms (like comparison and contrast, description, narration, the 5-paragraph essay, etc.), and against "cultural literacy" transmission models (see also Stunkel, 1998, for a traditional defense of "the lecture"). Since the 1960s, dialogic and student-centered methods from expressivist, feminist, and other critical teachers have foregrounded the personal and the social as the subject matters Dewey called for in his reference to "vital impressions and convictions." The remarkable growth of composition studies in the last decades has led to substantial options to skill drills, such as writing-across-the-curriculum, ethnography-as-syllabus, writing process methods, service learning, journal writing, community literacy approaches, literacy narratives, mainstreaming basic writers, portfolio assessment, and collaborative learning, with many classrooms redesigned as writing workshops. These forward-looking developments in language arts coexist with the regressive dominance of grammars and workbooks, and the rise of more standardized testing and more mandated syllabi in public schools, as well as the greater exploitation of adjunct teachers in higher education (Shor, 1997). Top-down authority in school and society has aggressively reasserted itself against bottom-up efforts for democratic language arts.

In this conflicted milieu, recent developments include the emergence of critical literacy as one approach to pedagogy and language use. Critical literacy can be thought of as a social practice in itself and as a tool for the study of other social practices. That is, critical literacy is reflective and reflexive: Language use and education are social practices used to critically study all social practices including the social practices of language use and education. Globally, this literate practice seeks the larger cultural context of any specific situation. "Only as we interpret school activities with reference to the larger circle of social activities to which they relate do we find any standard for judging their moral significance," Dewey wrote (*Moral Principles in Education*, 13). Critical literacy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goal of challenging inequality and developing an activist citizenry. The two foundational thinkers in this area are certainly Dewey and Freire, but the work of Lev Vygotsky is also central. Some contemporary critical educators have made exceptional contributions: theorists and practitioners like Elsa Auerbach, Jim Berlin, Bill Bigelow, Patricia Bizzell, Stephen Brookfield, Linda Christensen, Jim Cummins, Nan Elsasser, Marilyn Frankenstein, Henry Giroux, Patricia Irvine, Donaldo Macedo, Peter Mayo, Peter McLaren, Richard Ohmann, Bob Peterson, Arthur Powell, Roger Simon, and Nina Wallerstein; feminists

like Carmen Luke, Jennifer Gore, and Kathleen Weiler; and multiculturalists like Jim Banks, Antonia Darder, Deborah Menkart, Sonia Nieto, Nancy Schniedewind, and Christine Sleeter.

The diverse paths to critical literacy represent it as a discourse and pedagogy that can be configured in feminist, multicultural, queer, and neo-Marxist approaches. As mentioned earlier, critical teaching invites students to consider options to fitting quietly into the way things are. Disturbing the socialization of students and teachers into the system is certainly not easy, transparent, or risk-free (try questioning Nike's use of sweatshop labor to students who are Nike'd from head to toe and for whom Michael Jordan is an airborne god; try questioning such ventures as the Gulf War of 1991 among students with military relatives ordered to the front in Iraq). Coming to critical literacy is a rather unpredictable and even contentious process filled with surprises, resistances, breakthroughs, and reversals (Shor, 1996). It's no easy or open road for a number of reasons I've been defining in various books. The forces that need questioning are very old, deeply entrenched, and remarkably complex, sometimes too complicated for the interventions of critical pedagogy in a single semester. But, as Horton and Freire (1990) put it, we make the road by walking, and for teachers who report their experiences so far, the critical road has produced some interesting results and some still unresolved problems.

## **Do Not Walk Gently Into That Status Quo: Alternative Roads for Development**

As I've been arguing, critical literacy belongs to Deweyan constructivist education which has also been associated with *activity theory*. As David Russell (1995) defined it in a masterful essay:

Activity theory analyzes human behavior and consciousness in terms of *activity systems*: goal-directed, historically situated, cooperative human interactions, such as a child's attempt to reach an out-of-reach toy, a job interview, a "date," a social club, a classroom, a discipline, a profession, an institution, a political movement, and so on. The activity system is the basic unit of analysis for both cultures' and individuals' psychological and social processes...Activity systems are historically developed, mediated by tools, dialectically structured, analyzed as the relationship of participants and tools, and changed through *zones of proximal development*. (54-55)

Activity theory in general, and the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) specifically, derive from cognitivist Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) who proposed that such zones exist when a less- developed individual or student interacts with a more-advanced person or teacher, allowing the student to achieve things not possible when acting on her or his own. The relationship with the more-developed person pulls the less-developed forward, a dynamic similar to the way Dewey understood curriculum that began from student experience and was structured forward into organized reflective knowledge of the kind

teachers have. In posing experience as the starting point of a reflective process, Dewey asked: "What is the place and meaning of subject-matter and of organization within experience? How does subject-matter function? Is there anything inherent in experience which tends towards progressive organization of its contents?" (*Experience and Education*, 19).

A critical writing class is a zone where teachers invite students to move into deepening interrogations of knowledge in its global contexts. The main differences between critical literacy as I propose it here and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development are first that critical literacy is an activity that reconstructs and develops ALL parties involved, pulling teachers forward as well as students (whereas Vygotsky focused on student development), and second that dissident politics is foregrounded in a critical literacy program, inviting democratic relations in class and democratic action outside class (whereas Vygotsky did not foreground power relations as the social context for learning). I want here to emphasize the mutual and dissident orientations of critical literacy's zone compared to the ZPD of Vygotsky. Again, one key departure is that all participants in a critical process become redeveloped as democratic agents and social critics. Critical teaching is not a one-way development, not "something done for students or to them" for their own good (Freire, 1989, 34). It's not a paternal campaign of clever teachers against defenseless students. Rather, a critical process is driven and justified by mutuality. This ethic of mutual development can be thought of as a Freirean addition to the Vygotskian zone. By inviting students to develop critical thought and action on various subject matters, the teacher herself develops as a critical-democratic educator who becomes more informed of the needs, conditions, speech habits, and perceptions of the students, from which knowledge she designs activities and into which she integrates her special expertise. Besides learning in-process how to design a course *for* the students, the critical teacher also learns how to design the course *with* the students (co-governance). A mutual learning process develops the teacher's democratic competence in negotiating the curriculum and in sharing power. Overall, then, vis a vis the Freirean addition to the Vygotskian zone, the mutual development ethic constructs students as authorities, agents, and unofficial teachers who educate the official teacher while also getting educated by each other and by the teacher.

Though he highlighted mutuality in his two foundational works, Freire (1970, 1973) was not a libertarian educator of the "Summerhill" kind. He believed in rigor, structure, and political contention in society at large. For Freire, critical education as a group process rather than as an individualist one, was neither permissive nor agnostic (*A Pedagogy for Liberation*, "Chapter Three," 75-96). That is, on the one hand, students and teachers were not free to do whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, and on the other hand, the conceptual knowledge of the teacher was not denied but rather posed as a necessary element. The teacher must be expert and knowledgeable to be a responsible critical educator, Freire thought.

Yet, teacher knowledge and authority could also contradict dialogue and thus destroy mutuality in this critical process. A central problem for Freirean mutuality is how and when a teacher should use authority and expertise to promote rather than to silence student agency. Saying too much or too little, too soon or too late, can damage the group process. The problem of adjusting to dialogic practice is complicated because students and teachers have already been deeply socialized by prior "banking" models, that is, by one-way teacher-talk and non-negotiable syllabi. Critical literacy has to develop mutual inquiry in a field already crowded with anti-critical monologue. No wonder, then, that in Freire's "culture circle," the first problem of education was reconciling the student-teacher dichotomy (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 57-60). Freire complained early on that 'liberatory' educators were themselves too often poor practitioners of dialogue and too infected with the old habits of one-way communication:

A major problem in setting up the program is instructing the teams of coordinators. Teaching the purely technical aspects of the procedure is not difficult. The difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude--that of dialogue, so absent in our upbringing and education. (*Education for Critical Consciousness*, 52; see also *Empowering Education*, Chapter 4, 85-111)

While distributing democratic authority is a teacher's challenge in a dialogic program, there is also the opposite dilemma, that is, of the teacher *not having enough authority*. In some cases, the *lack* of authority interferes with a teacher's ability to initiate a critical and power-sharing process. On the one hand, there are classrooms where some students' disruptive behavior overwhelms other students and the teacher, making control the issue instead of knowledge-making or power-sharing. On the other hand, the authority teachers bring to class varies according to the teacher's gender, race, age, condition of employment (full or part-time), physical stature and ability, regional location, grade level, discipline or subject matter, type of institution (elite or mass), and other factors. Similarly, the students' varying ages, genders, races, classes, ethnicities, etc., equally affect their authority as well as that of the teacher. Students who develop socially subordinate identities can possess too little authority for them to feel secure in joining an unfamiliar critical process. Put simply, there is simply no universal teacher authority uniformly empowered in front of standard students. Teachers, students, and settings differ. The same teacher can have more authority in one class and less in another because few classes are alike. In sum, identity differences in an unequal society mean that teachers possess uneven authority when they address students and students possess uneven and unequal authority when they encounter a critical process. Consequently, while all teachers need to establish and distribute authority in critical classrooms, some are at a distinct advantage both in taking charge and in sharing power: white males who are tall, older, full-time, long-employed, and able-bodied, though teachers of color tend to have more authority than whites in inner-city schools with minority populations.

These differences complicate the mutual ethic of critical literacy. The risk and difficulty of democratizing education should be apparent to those who read these lines or to those who have attempted critical literacy, perhaps encountering the awkward position of distributing authority to students who often do not want it or know how to use it. Still, the long history of this mutual ethic makes it a landmark responsibility of democratic teachers. Mutuality certainly goes back to Dewey, who was preoccupied with the cooperative development of social feeling and with the democratic involvement of students:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (*Experience and Education*, 67)

Dewey saw cooperative relations as central to democratizing education and society. To him, any social situation where people could not consult, collaborate, or negotiate was an activity of slaves rather than of a free people. Freedom and liberty are high-profile 'god-words' in American life, but, traditionally, teachers are trained and rewarded as unilateral authorities who transmit expert skills and official information, who not only take charge but stay in charge. At the same time, students are trained to be authority-dependent, waiting to be told what things mean and what to do, a position that encourages passive-aggressive submission and sabotage.

In this and other difficult settings for critical pedagogy, I knew Freire as an optimist in touch with the limits of his own interventions. His pedagogy was hopeful but historical, utopian but situated, that is, aware of the limits in any specific situation yet aimed to question and overcome restrictions. Freire proposed that critical pedagogy was one form of cultural action for freedom whose goal was to bring a humane future to life against and within an unjust present (*A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 184-187). Freire's social hopefulness and concrete practice stood on the shoulders of John Dewey, whose impact Freire openly acknowledged. Dewey was himself optimistically focused on pragmatic "agencies for doing" (*Democracy and Education*, 38), by which he meant concrete methods for enacting a project in a specific setting. Dewey proposed that a curriculum must have a social ethic at its core: "the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past" (*Democracy and Education*, 191). As did Freire, who emphasized "generative themes" taken from everyday life as the starting points for problem-posing, Dewey recognized the power of experience as a curricular resource for critical learning. Dewey even quantified this everyday thematic power with a metaphor by saying that "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory" (*Democracy and Education*, 144), certainly a strong statement for this Vermont

native of sober words. Only by relating to experience, Dewey argued, does theory have any "vital and verifiable significance." Reflection on experience, he thought, could yield extensive theory while theory alone was "a mere verbal formula, a set of catchwords" that obscured critical thinking. Freire later referred to theory-based action/action-based theorizing as "praxis."

The notion of praxis/reflective action which so preoccupied these two thinkers could be understood in the difference between *theorizing practice* and *theorizing theory*. Consider the phrase 'theorizing practice' and how it can be reversed to 'practicing theory.' This is what praxis meant to Freire and reflective action to Dewey, a close relationship between discourse and action, between symbolic analysis and concrete action, using language as a tool to enhance our understanding of experience--theorizing practice/practicing theory. However, while theorizing practice can be reversed to practicing theory without doing violence to the concept, if we try this same linguistic reversal with the phrase 'theorizing theory,' we lose praxis; we wind up with the same phrase we began with, 'theorizing theory,' because the participle and the noun in that phrase have the same root, referring to the same thing, theory alone, symbolic analysis, words without the world (as Freire might have said). Theorizing theory produces abstract discourse whose reference to experience and history gets lost. Yet, in academic life, as we know, the more abstract a spoken or written discourse, the more prestige the speaker or the text represents. Herein lies the immense problem of the elite discourses already dominating academic work in classrooms, conferences, and professional publications (see Peter Elbow's, 1991, provocative and sensible essay on the students' need to use their own language for writing development).

To do praxis through pedagogy, imagine the joint process of theorizing experience and experientializing theory. Critical teaching is a praxis that begins from student generative themes and then invites unfamiliar reflection and unfamiliar connection of the local to the global. In doing so, this special discourse evolves what I have called "the third idiom," that is, a local critical discourse synthesized in the immediate setting for the purposes undertaken there, different from the everyday language of students and from the academic language of the teacher (see *Empowering Education*, Chapter 7). The third idiom is thus an invented medium that emerges from the conflicts and collaborations of teacher and students. The emergence of a situated third idiom can suggest that some of the power conflicts between students and teacher are being worked through, because the participants are co-constructing a new code not identical to the ones they brought to class. In this regard, Patricia Bizzell's (forthcoming) work in "hybrid discourses" is helpful in clarifying this new idiom as an egalitarian option to traditional academic discourse.

## **Working Through the Writing Class**

As I have argued, human discourse in general, education in particular, and literacy classes specifically are forces for the making self in society. On the one hand, we make ourselves



in the world according to the way we have learned to think about society and our place in it. On the other hand, human thought, language, and action are never fully under singular control, never monolithically determined by a status quo. The opposite to monolithic discourse that sets the agenda from the top down is dialogic discourse that evolves an agenda from the bottom up. Human agency is rarely erased in even the most controlled settings where people find ways to cope with, push against, and sabotage authority (what Scott called "the weapons of the weak"). The more space open or won for critical action, the more we can speak and act critically to change ourselves and the world. We can critique the way things are, imagine alternatives, hypothesize ways to get there, act from these plans, evaluate and adjust our actions (Dewey's problem-solving method, 1933; Stephen Brookfield's, 1987, social theory of critical thinking).

Critical writing classes test the open space available in any setting for questioning the status quo. Because these kinds of writing classes propose alternatives to the dominant culture, the stakes are high. Some indication of just how high the stakes are in doing critical teaching can be seen in the enormous official attention devoted to questions of reading, writing, and the canon. So much controlling administration and testing directed to regulating literacy makes language use and instruction into pillars of the status quo. Power is obviously involved in the "sponsorship of literacy," as Deborah Brandt (1998) wrote:

...everybody's literacy practices are operating in differential economies, which supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the practices in use. In fact, the interviews I conducted are filled with examples of how economic and political forces, some of them originating in quite distant corporate and government policies, affect people's day-to-day ability to seek out and practice literacy. ("Sponsors of Literacy," 172)

The power issues specifically circulating in language education were described like this by John Rouse (1979):

...language learning is the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific social identity. What kind of person should we help bring into being?...[E]very vested interest in the community is concerned with what is to happen during those years, with how language training is to be organized and evaluated, for the continued survival of any power structure requires the production of certain personality types. The making of an English program becomes, then, not simply an educational venture but a political act. ("The Politics of Composition," 1)

Rouse noted that a writing program can help produce people "acceptable to those who would maintain things as they are, who already have power," which Richard Ohmann (1976, 1987) saw as the official function of composition. Ohmann and Rouse anticipated Jim Berlin's idea that when we teach writing we are teaching a version of the world and

the students' places in it. Berlin (1996) said that a curriculum "is a device for encouraging the production of a certain kind of graduate, in effect, a certain kind of person. In directing what courses will be taken in what order, the curriculum undertakes the creation of consciousness. The curriculum does not do this on its own, free of outside influence. It instead occupies a position between the conditions of the larger society it is serving--the economic, political, and cultural sectors--and the work of teacher- scholars within the institution" (17). Berlin's orientation was concretely tied to a pedagogy for critical consciousness by Tom Fox (1993), who proposed a composition class that

...interrogates cultural and political commonplaces...refuses to repeat clichéd explanations for poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia...explores and embodies conflicts...critiques institutional inequities, especially in the immediate context of the classroom, the writing program, the department, the university, but also in the institutions that have played an important role in students' lives...demonstrates successful practices of resistance, that seeks historical evidence for possibilities and promise...that self-consciously explores the workings of its own rhetoric...that seeks to reduce the deafening violence of inequality. ("Standards and Access," 43- 44)

While Fox stipulated goals for questioning the status quo, Robert Brooke (1987) defined writing, *per se*, as an act of resistance:

[Writing] necessarily involves standing outside the roles and beliefs offered by a social situation--it involves questioning them, searching for new connections, building ideas that may be in conflict with accepted ways of thinking and acting. Writing involves being able to challenge one's assigned roles long enough that one can think originally; it involves living in onflict with accepted (expected) thought and action. ("Underlife and Writing Instruction," 141)

Brooke offered an intelligent argument that writing itself was synonymous with divergent thinking. Still, I question the direct link of composing with resisting. Some kinds of writing and pedagogy consciously disconfirm the status quo, but not composing and instruction in general. Think of all the books written from and for the status quo. Further, it is also easy to find composition classes that reflect traditional values and encourage status quo writing ("current- traditional rhetoric," see Ohmann, as well as Crowley, 1996). Human beings are certainly active when writing, and all action involves development and agency of some kinds, but not all agency or development is critical. Critical agency and writing are self-conscious positions of questioning the status quo and imagining alternative arrangements for self and society (Brookfield, 1987).

This perspective on literacy for questioning society is markedly different from Erika Lindemann's (1995) definition of writing as "...a process of communication that uses a conventional graphic system to convey a message to a reader" (11). From a different point of view than Lindeman's rhetorical functionalism, Louise Phelps (1988) acknowledged writing as a rich cultural activity, not a set of basic skills: "the potential for

composing becomes the principle of reflection...and especially the critical spirit" (67, echoing Brooke above and endorsing Shirley Brice Heath's, 1983, idea of writing as complex social activity). Phelps also embraced Ann Berthoff's notion (taken up as well by Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984, and John Mayher, 1990) that "Writing is an act of making meaning for self and for others" (70). Related to activity theory and to cultural context, Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holtzman (1989) proposed that "Writing is a form of social action. It is part of the way in which some people live in the world. Thus, when thinking about writing, we must also think about the way that people live in the world" (xii). They reflected Brian Street's (1984) and Harvey Graff's (1987) arguments that all language use is socially situated, against what Street called the myth of autonomous literacy, that is, language falsely posed as independent of its social context.

The social context and making-of-meaning schools of literacy go back not only to Vygotsky's activity theory but also to Dewey's definition of "education" as increasing the ability to perceive and act on meaning in one's society (*Democracy and Education*, 76ff). To Dewey, the goal of education was to advance students' ability to understand, articulate, and act democratically in their social experience. This definition of education as meaning-making in culture prefigures the epistemic approach to composition, which Kenneth Dowst (1980) described as "the activity of making some sense out of an extremely complex set of personal perceptions and experiences of an infinitely complex world...A writer (or other language-user), in a sense, composes the world in which he or she lives" (66). Maxine Hairston (1992b) also featured the epistemic nature of "writing as a way of learning," reiterating Brooke's ideal that writing per se is a critical activity: "Writing helps us absorb new information...discover new information...[and] promotes critical thinking" (1).

Berlin, Ohmann, and Fox would agree with the epistemic definition of writing as a way of making meaning, but they distinguish their critical position by foregrounding and historicizing the power relations at any site where meaning is made. Specifying the political forces in any rhetorical setting is a key distinction of critical literacy separating it from other writing-to-learn proponents and epistemic rhetoricians. Critical literacy as a discourse that foregrounds and questions power relations was called "social-epistemic rhetoric" by Berlin (1988, 1996). The orientation to foreground and question the ideologies in any setting links critical educators of diverse persuasions--feminists, multiculturalists, queer theorists, and neo-Marxists. Even though each dissident approach uses a different identity lens, they all expose and disconfirm dominant ideologies in the rhetorical settings which construct identity in society. Because there are multiple ideologies at the root of the social experiences which make us into who we are (for example, male supremacy, white supremacy, corporate supremacy, heterosexism), the positions or identities for contesting the status quo also need to be appropriately multiple. Critical literacy thus crosses identity boundaries because it is a discourse and pedagogy for counter-hegemonic resistance. This resistance occasionally becomes a common cause

against dominant culture when diverse insurgent groups coalesce, but much stands in the way of coalitions in a society where *every difference is used against us* by an elite minority maintaining power by divide-and-conquer among other mechanisms.

## **Identity, Difference, and Power: Literacy in Contact Zones**

Critical literacy classes focused on identity differences have also been construed as "contact zones" by Mary Louise Pratt (1991): "...social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power..."(34). Pratt proposed some rhetorical arts for a critical pedagogy that profiles differences while resisting dominant culture, including two useful alternatives to mimicking elite discourse in writing classes. These two alternatives for producing texts offer students and teachers options to assimilating uncritically into academic discourse:

Autoethnography: a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them...

Transculturation: the processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture...While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for. ("Arts of the Contact Zone," 35,36)

These literate practices ask students to take critical postures towards their own language uses as well as towards the discourses dominating school and society, such as mainstream news media. Further, from Pratt's contact zone theory, we can extract and summarize more pedagogical advice for questioning power relations and encouraging critical literacy:

Structure the class around "safe houses" (group caucuses within the larger class where marginalized "others" can develop their positions).

Offer exercises in oral and written storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of "others."

Give special attention to the rhetorical techniques of parody, comparison, and critique so as to strengthen students' abilities to speak back to their immersion in the literate products of the dominant culture.

Explore suppressed aspects of history (what Foucault referred to as "disqualified" or "unqualified" narratives relating popular resistance).

Define ground rules for communication across differences and in the midst of existing hierarchies of authority.

Do systematic studies of cultural mediation, or how cultural material is produced, distributed, received, and used.

Finally, Pratt enumerated other "critical arts" of the contact zone that could encourage a rhetoric of resistance: doing imaginary dialogues (to develop student ability to create subjectivities in history), writing in multiple dialects and idioms (to avoid privileging one dominant form), and addressing diverse audiences with discourses of resistance (to invite students to imagine themselves speaking to both empowered and disempowered groups). Pratt's pedagogy for producing critical discourse has been deployed for writing classes by Patricia Bizell and Bruce Herzberg (*Negotiating Difference*, 1996). In general, contact zone theory has a friendly fit with the critical literacy I defined elsewhere as

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (*Empowering Education*, 129)

My definition is also consistent with Aronowitz's and Giroux's (1985) notion that "critical literacy would make clear the connection between knowledge and power. It would present knowledge as a social construction linked to norms and values, and it would demonstrate modes of critique that illuminate how, in some cases, knowledge serves very specific economic, political and social interests. Moreover, critical literacy would function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge" (132). With this kind of literacy, students "learn how to read the world and their lives critically and relatedly...and, most importantly, it points to forms of social action and collective struggle" (132). This activist agenda was also central to Joe Kretovics' (1985) definition: "Critical literacy...points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but 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" (51).

## **Critical Literacy For Envisioning Change**

Envisioning and realizing change was a key goal of Freire's literacy teams in Brazil before they were destroyed by the military coup of April, 1964:

From the beginning, we rejected...a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness...We wanted a literacy program which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture, a program with human beings as its subjects rather than as patient recipients, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts, one in which students would develop the impatience and vivacity which characterize search and invention. (*Education for Critical Consciousness*, 43)

Freire's original method included trisyllabic exercises for decoding and encoding words. Even though this project had explicit political intentions, Freire's practical pedagogy focused on writing, reading, and dialogue from generative themes based in student life, not on didactic lectures based in teacherly discourse. Freire thus developed pragmatic "agencies for doing," to use Dewey's phrase. The students' literacy skills emerged through concrete exercises on generative themes displayed in drawings ("codifications") from their lives (Dewey's vital subject matter as the context for developing reflective habits and language abilities).

Freire's much-read reports of dialogic pedagogy for illiterate Brazilian peasants and workers offer an instructive comparison to the literacy narrative of Mike Rose (1990) who chronicled his life and work among basic writers at UCLA and elsewhere. Rose, based at a high-profile campus dominated by academic discourse, developed and taught a rhetorical form of critical literacy: "framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying theory to disparate phenomena...comparing, synthesizing, analyzing...summarizing, classifying..."(188, 194, 138). Rose's definition of critical literacy reiterates Mina Shaughnessy's (1977) earlier advice for teaching rhetorical habits to basic writers. By naming these literate habits and by asking students to learn them through complex cases drawn from across the curriculum, Rose responded to the academic needs of basic writers at a flagship campus, UCLA. In Freire's original culture circles, the situation was not academic but rather informal adult basic education offered where the students lived or worked, certainly not on a campus. Later in his career, when Freire became Secretary of Education for the City of Sao Paulo in 1989, responsible for an impoverished school system of about 700,000 students, he proposed that standard forms should be taught to non-elite Brazilian students in the context of democratizing schools and integrating the themes of their lives:

Finally, teachers have to say to students, Look, in spite of being beautiful, this way you speak also includes the question of *power*. Because of the political problem of power, you need to learn how to command the dominant language, in order for you to survive in the struggle to transform society. (*A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 73)

Freire reiterated this point a few years later in *Pedagogy of the City* (1993): "The need to master the dominant language is not only to survive but also better to fight for the transformation of an unjust and cruel society where the subordinate groups are rejected, insulted, and humiliated" (135). In these remarks, Freire foregrounds ideology and education for changing society, activist positions typical of critical literacy.

Freire's remarks just above involve an inflammatory issue of language education in the U.S. and elsewhere: Should all students be taught standard usage and initiated into academic discourses used in traditional disciplines, or should students be encouraged to use the language they bring to class (called *students' rights to their own language* in a

controversial policy statement by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1973)? In the U.S., the argument for teaching standard usage to black youth has been taken up strenuously by Lisa Delpit (1995). Yet, despite her stance in favor of standard usage for all, Delpit produced a special anthology defending "ebonics" in the classroom (with co-editor Theresa Perry, *The Real Ebonics Debate*, 1998). This anthology includes a strong essay by Geneva Smitherman, the long-time proponent of black students using African-American English for writing and teaching. A bidialectal or contrastive rhetoric approach is being suggested here, for honoring and using the students' community language while also studying standard English. Freire would likely agree with the bidialectal approach, but he would insist on ethical and historical foundations for such a program: standard usage, rhetorical forms, and academic discourse make democratic sense only when taught in a critical curriculum explicitly posing problems about the status quo based in themes from the students' lives. In a program clearly against inequality, many tools and resources can be useful, including standard usage, bidialectalism, bilingualism, contrastive translations of texts from community language into academic discourse, etc. In a critical program, the teaching of standard form is thus embedded in a curriculum oriented towards democratic development. By themselves, correct usage, paragraph skills, rhetorical forms like narrative, description, or cause and effect, are certainly not foundations for democratic or critical consciousness, as Bizzell (1992) recognized after her long attempt to connect the teaching of formal technique with the development of social critique.

Another oppositional approach merging technique and critique is Gerald Graff's (1992) "teach the conflicts" method, which has been developed thoughtfully for writing classes by Don Lazere (see his chapter in *Critical Literacy in Action*, Shor and Pari, 1999). Lazere provides rhetorical frameworks to students for analyzing ideologies in competing texts and media sources. The specific rhetorical techniques serve social critique here, insofar as the curriculum invites students to develop ideological sophistication in a society that mystifies politics, a society in fact where 'politics' has become a repulsive 'devil-word.' Lazere uses problem-posing at the level of topical and academic themes (social issues chosen by the teacher and subject matters taken from expert bodies of knowledge and then posed to students as questions) rather than generative themes (materials taken from student thought and language). (See *Empowering Education*, 2-5, 46-48, 73-84.) My own Deweyan and Freirean preference is to situate critical literacy in student discourse and perceptions as the starting points, but the "teach the conflicts" method of Graff and Lazere is indeed a critical approach worthy of study, especially because it teaches us a way to pose academic subject matters as problems, questions, and exercises rather than merely lecturing them to students.

Merging the study of formal technique with social critique is not simple but this project is no more and no less "political" than any other kind of literacy program. The position taken by critical literacy advocates is that no pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is

value-free, no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations. To teach is to encourage human beings to develop in one direction or another. In fostering student development, every teacher chooses some subject matters, some ways of knowing, some ways of speaking and relating, instead of others. These choices orient students to map the world and their relation to it.

Every educator, then, orients students towards certain values, actions, and language with implications for the kind of society and people these behaviors will produce. This inevitable involvement of education with developmental values was called "stance" by Jerome Bruner (1986):

...the medium of exchange in which education is conducted--language--can never be neutral...[I]t imposes a point of view not only about the world to which it refers but toward the use of mind in respect of this world. Language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view...I do not for a minute believe that one can teach even mathematics or physics without transmitting a sense of stance toward nature and toward the use of the mind...The idea that any *humanistic* subject can be taught without revealing one's stance toward matters of human pith and substance is, of course, nonsense...[T]he language of education, if it is to be an invitation to reflection and culture creating, cannot be the so-called uncontaminated language of fact and "objectivity." (*Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 121, 128, 129)

Also denying the neutrality of language and learning, poet Adrienne Rich (1979) said of her work in the Open Admissions experiment attacked by conservative authorities at the City University of New York that "My daily life as a teacher confronts me with young men and women who had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless" (61). Rich ended her tribute to the cultural democracy of Open Admissions by connecting the writing of words to the changing of worlds:

[L]anguage is power and...those who suffer from injustice most are the least able to articulate their suffering...[T]he silent majority, if released into language, would not be content with a perpetuation of the conditions which have betrayed them. But this notion hangs on a special conception of what it means to be released into language: not simply learning the jargon of an elite, fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, but learning that language can be used as a means for changing reality. (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*, 67-68)

Thus, to be for critical literacy is to take a moral stand on the kind of just society and democratic education we want. This is an ethical center proposed many years ago by the patron saint of American education, John Dewey, who insisted that school and society must be based in cooperation, democratic relations, and egalitarian distribution of resources and authority. Progressive educators since Dewey, such as George Counts, Maxine Greene, and George Wood, have continued this ethical emphasis. Freire openly



acknowledged his debt to Dewey and declared his search "for an education that stands for liberty and against the exploitation of the popular classes, the perversity of the social structures, the silence imposed on the poor--always aided by an authoritarian education" (Cox, 94).

Many teachers reject authoritarian education. Many strive against fitting students quietly into the status quo. Many share the democratic goals of critical literacy. This educational work means, finally, inventing what Richard Ohmann (1987) referred to as a "literacy-from-below" that questions the way things are and imagines alternatives, so that the word and the world may meet in history for a dream of social justice.

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