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Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

## A Critical Literacy Approach to Student Affairs Education

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### — Abstract —

This article argues for the use of critical literacy as a critical pedagogy in student affairs practice. The authors describe how some currents of the student affairs literature have shifted toward a focus on student learning and critical approaches to student development and learning. Subsequently, they discuss the social turn in our understanding of literacy and a related move toward critical approaches to understanding literacy as a social practice. Finally, they present a synthesis of the literature, which results in considerations for approaching higher education student affairs contexts through a critical literacy framework, exposing gaps and areas for future theorizing and research.

Keywords: critical literacy, higher education, student affairs, student learning

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The field of student affairs primarily focuses on student safety, support, growth, and learning within and across a range of experiences outside of classrooms at colleges and universities (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004). The field of literacy studies focuses on the role of reading, writing, and related semiotic systems (e.g., images and sounds) within and across social domains of people's lives, such as their homes, schools, and workplaces. To the extent these social domains support particular literacies and marginalize others, along with the people who enact them, the subfield of critical literacy provides tools for understanding and transforming social domains to be more equitable. We assert that the fields of student affairs and critical literacy have a complementary relationship that can aid in understanding how and why students make meaning across different parts of their lives, as well as how they assimilate to and/or transform aspects of these different social domains. Furthermore, we argue that we can support college-age students in noticing and questioning systems of oppression as the systematic and unjust treatment of a population based on a shared characteristic, whether assumed or claimed, such as race, gender, or ability. We argue that when college-age students question systems of oppression at work within and across social domains, they are potentially better prepared to navigate and dismantle oppressive forces that shape their lived experiences.

In this article, we describe how some currents of the student affairs literature have shifted to focus on student learning and critical approaches to student development and learning. Subsequently, we discuss the social turn in our understanding of literacy and a related move toward critical approaches to under-

standing literacy as a social practice. Finally, we present a synthesis of the literature, exposing gaps and areas for future theorizing and research.

### A Note on Positionality

A researcher's perspective, intentionally or not, seeps into the pores of the scientific and shapes the very essence of any project, whether empirical or theoretical. Therefore, it is essential to note our positionality in relation to this discussion.

Brian is a student affairs professional who has been in the field for 10 years. His salient identities include white<sup>1</sup>, male, queer, and low to lower-middle socioeconomic class of origin. He questions the logics that intercept his understanding of the topic at hand through these identities, which means questioning whether his theorizing benefits him or people with his identities to the detriment of others. Does, for example, applying critical literacy to a student affairs context truly provide opportunities to transform higher education for the benefit of marginalized populations? This questioning has required Brian to seek to understand critical literacy through viewpoints and identities that differ from his own by reading research and testimonials from such perspectives. Brian has also, for some time, been an advocate for social transformation in education through critical, liberatory, and anti-oppressive frameworks (e.g., Kumashiro, 2002; 2004). Through the process of researching and writing this article, Brian monitored his assumptions through journaling and checking his work with colleagues who hold different perspectives. It is Brian's view that a student learning approach has the potential to be anti-oppressive (i.e., actively resist and work against oppressive forces) and liberatory (i.e., facilitate healing and freedom from injustices), and he seeks to better understand how critical literacy plays a role in this potential within student affairs.

Ryan is an assistant professor in the fields of literacy studies and English education. From a critical literacies perspective, Ryan seeks to understand the relationships among the literacy practices people

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<sup>1</sup> While the APA (2010) style guide states that racial and ethnic groups should be capitalized, we have chosen not to capitalize "white" as an act of resistance to "challenge the assumed power and dominance that is embedded in whiteness and white supremacy" (Ashlee, 2019, p. 211).

bring with them and the sanctioned literacy practices at work in particular social contexts, such as schools and communities. These relationships among literacy practices often involve agentic negotiation, such as adapting, adopting, resisting, and outright rejecting the literacy practices sanctioned in a particular social space or physical place. Drawing on ethnographic methodologies, Ryan attempts to understand how power relations shape this negotiation among literacy practices and the social and learning consequences of those involved. Within this work, Ryan attempts to decenter his identities, including white, male, heterosexual, and middle socioeconomic class of origin, through principled ethnographic investigations that seek to understand the emic perspectives and experiences of the people with whom he works. In addition to descriptive studies of how youth negotiate literacy practices, Ryan is an advocate for designing learning opportunities that support the negotiation of literacy practices that are of value to them. Though Ryan is largely unfamiliar with the field of student affairs, he conceptualizes learning within higher education (and generally) as the adaptation of social and literacy practices sanctioned by particular institutions and disciplines.

We share these details so that readers can keep in mind our positionality as they interpret our work, which is about finding connections between our fields in the hope that doing so can advance the kinds of transformative practices and pedagogies both authors believe in. Throughout this article, we challenge readers to consider not only how literacy relates to student affairs, but also how K–12 education relates to higher education and how learning in the classroom relates to learning outside of the classroom (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). These same challenges were and are salient for us. Our differences provided a shared space for dialogue about how student affairs educators may unknowingly support oppressive literacy practices in their work and how literacy can be a tool for dismantling oppressive systems.

## **Evolutions in Student Affairs Theory and Practice**

Institutions of higher education as a whole have a pernicious history of exclusion of, discrimination against, and harm to people with marginalized identities. Jaimes (1999) showed how Dartmouth College, for example, was created to “save” Native Americans by assimilating them into the dominant culture as Christian missionaries. Ford (2017) described how, “for most of its history in the United States higher education...was about preserving Christian civilization and preparing young people for a life of service” (p. 151). Prior to the late 19th century, faculty at institutions of higher education were responsible for both the intellectual and moral development of students (Ford, 2017). As faculty became more specialized in teaching and research and the function of higher education shifted toward developing an employable workforce, faculty interest in the moral development of students and the administrative tasks they once performed waned. This change led to the creation of new administrative posts, which quickly came to be called deans of men and deans of women, to meet these needs (Hevel, 2016). The profession of student affairs is firmly rooted in the initial separation of these duties from the professorial role and the exclusionary history of higher education.

The inclusion of women as deans did not lead to the erasure of oppression in higher education and was, in some ways, a result of it. While the growth of deans of women coincided with the gradual integration of women into all-male colleges and universities, many women found themselves in such roles after earning graduate degrees and being subsequently shut out by men in faculty hiring processes (Hevel, 2016). However, this position did create opportunities for women to have a more direct impact on the field of student affairs and marginalized students. Perkins (2015) shared a history of Lucy Diggs Slowe, “one the earliest black women to study in the field of student affairs” (p. 732) and the first Black wom-

an to hold the post of Dean of Women at Howard University, which she held from 1922–1937. According to Perkins (2015), “Slowe sought to promote the growth and development of female college students as individuals, particularly those interested in entering the new and growing fields opening to women” (p. 732). Through such efforts, the responsibilities of such deans expanded beyond housing and discipline to include student advisement, career guidance, overseeing student publications, and additional positions that emerged throughout the early 20th century as extensions of these deans’ responsibilities and expanding portfolios (Hevel, 2016).

Alongside this expansion, the field of student affairs took on a more scientific approach to working with and understanding students through the influence of the field of psychology, culminating in the publication of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV) in 1937. Emerging from the process of professionalizing the field, the SPPV was an early document that focused on the whole student and “placed an emphasis, in brief, upon the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone” (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937, p. 1). Torres, DeSawal, and Hernández (2012) argued that the SPPV marked the beginning of the recognition of student affairs as a profession of educators by defining “student affairs as an essential component in higher education [that provides] holistic learning and transformational thinking for the benefit of developing the whole student” (p. 25). However, in a world where the vast majority of college students were socioeconomically advantaged white men, it is worth questioning whose development student affairs professionals at the time centered (Torres et al., 2012). While the field at large focused on wealthy, white male students, professionals of color and women advocated for the needs of students of color and women with little support from their white colleagues and men of color colleagues (Hevel, 2016).

Following World War II, colleges and universities faced an identity crisis as they welcomed a rap-

idly growing and increasingly diverse college student population, (Coomes & Gerda, 2015). In response, student affairs professionals of the 1960s and 1970s moved toward *student development*, which drew insights from human development and counseling (Coomes & Gerda, 2015). Still, Jones and Stewart (2016) pointed out that most early scholars created student development theories with white, male, and socioeconomically privileged students in mind. Hevel (2016) showed how much of the progress for marginalized populations (both students and staff) was made through the labor of women, especially women of color. Through these historical efforts and the continued advocacy within the field of student affairs, conceptions of student development evolved to focus on marginalized voices that increasingly gained access to higher education during this period (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

As student development theories evolved and new theories emerged, outside organizations and government agencies began demanding clear measurement of student learning and other outcomes in response to critiques of higher education’s cost (Elkins, 2015). Some of those critical voices argued that the work of in student affairs units did not contribute to higher education’s core mission. In response, the ACPA published *The Student Learning Imperative* in 1994, arguing for “pairing an out-of-classroom understanding of learning processes with the formal teaching processes of the university to bring student affairs closer to the learning mission” (Coomes & Gerda, 2015, p. 18). A decade later, in 2004, ACPA and NASPA published *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, which argued that the entire college experience, including the developmental experiences outside of the classroom, should be viewed through the lens of learning such that student development and learning are two parts of one whole.

### Emerging Student Learning Approaches

Some professionals have taken on this call to consider their work through the lens of student learning,

with student learning institutes emerging from major professional associations and the inclusion of student learning in the field's professional competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2009). Still, this emphasis on student learning has been an altogether uncoordinated and disjunct experience across the field and college campuses (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006). For example, on a campus where one of the authors worked, a career center used to teach students about (white) professionalism in the workplace. Advice and marketing materials shared words and images primarily of men in suits and ties and women in blouses, jackets, and long skirts with fashionable purses. Meanwhile, the LGBTQ center and multicultural center independently taught students to critique and resist professionalism in different and sometimes conflicting ways. These conflicting signs and symbols of professionalism created confusing and challenging pathways for students attempting to make meaning of their lived experiences and possible futures as "professionals" in the workforce.

More recently, scholarship suggests more coordinated curricular approaches that funnel learning occurring outside of the classroom through educational priorities and map strategies to learning outcomes (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006; Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017); however, this scholarship has not yet attended to the nuances of pedagogy through a critical lens. More broadly, there is practically no published research on curricular approaches (Lichterman, 2016) and very little research and scholarship on pedagogical approaches to student affairs education. For example, a search of the ERIC database using the terms "student affairs" and "pedagogy" in article abstracts yielded a total of 17 peer-reviewed results, but few of these results are even remotely related to pedagogical approaches to student affairs work. There is also a lack of understanding of how the implementation of a learning orientation and pedagogical approaches in student affairs contexts integrates with research and scholarship on inclusive and critical pedagogy or how such approaches are implicated in and perpetuate

systems of inequity (i.e., differences in access based on identity). Hannah and Ellis (2018), for example, suggested that curricular approaches may reify social practices that undermine the desire for social justice due to their prescriptive nature.

This lack of attention to (critical) pedagogy in student affairs is surprising given the field's recent attention to the language of learning as well as historical and emerging research on critical approaches to student development (Torres et al., 2009). In a review of the field's growth over the last century, Jones and Stewart (2016) paid particular attention to social justice, identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, they largely left student learning out of the discussion. They argued that student development as a field has gone through three major waves. In the final wave, scholars view student development through critical frameworks, which center systems and structures of oppression rather than merely identities. Jones and Stewart (2016) further contended that these third wave perspectives brought to the forefront three central issues: (a) how oppressive systems influence both actual development and perceptions of development, (b) how systems of oppression and privilege can interact for members of more than one marginalized group, and (c) how an understanding of students' individual agency can inform how student affairs professionals interact with them as educators.

Through these emerging perspectives, new models attending to the needs of an increasingly (and already) diverse student population and methods for critiquing and transforming higher education continue to develop. Some scholars have questioned whether certain theoretical underpinnings of the field, such as Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship, hold up under the scrutiny of such frameworks. Abes and Hernández (2016), for example, argued that self-authorship may be dangerous for students with marginalized identities. Some scholars have engaged in research to better understand marginalized students' experiences, such as Nicolazzo (2017), who contributed to the field's knowledge on the experience



of trans\* college students “doing resilience” (p. 89) by engaging in practices that help them survive in educational institutions, which actively reject and harm them. Others have developed new ways (or articulated already known ways) of engaging with students with marginalized identities. For instance, Watt and Linley (2014) edited an issue for *New Directions for Student Services* entirely dedicated to the creation of multicultural initiatives in student affairs and higher education.

While these emerging models and perspectives provide valuable insight into how student affairs professionals conceptualize students and their growth and development in college as well as how to create environments that meet and support student needs, they do not center recent pedagogical frameworks. Still, there are examples of scholars framing student affairs work in the context of teaching and learning. Watt’s (2015) edited volume, *Designing Transformative Multicultural Initiatives*, expands on how multicultural initiatives operate within learning environments both in and outside of the classroom in higher education environments. Watt (2015) describes the volume’s contents as centering techniques and strategies for how to engage with difference (i.e., instances when individuals are confronted with aspects of themselves which make them different from others). At times, the arguments within the volume draw on pedagogy. For example, Watt’s (2015) authentic, action-oriented, and framing for environmental shifts (AAFES) method offers a means for aiding students in examining their own relationship with difference without marginalizing others. Furthermore, the method emphasizes working toward action that leads to change. This method is grounded in the work of both Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) by framing “multicultural initiatives as a practice of freedom...[and] a process of deconstructing dehumanizing environments and reconstructing them for optimal inclusion” (Watt, 2015, p. 2).

Watt’s (2015) work serves as an example of how critical theories can align with pedagogical frame-

works to advance transformational learning opportunities in student affairs contexts. Student affairs scholar-practitioners must continue to innovate as a field toward critical approaches to their work; the use of critical pedagogies provides them with a promising direction for continuing to merge theory and practice. In the next section, we turn to how our understanding of literacy has changed over time. The social and critical turns in literacy studies discussed in the following sections provide fertile space for aligning with other critical approaches to pedagogy in student affairs practitioners’ work with college students.

### Social Turn in Literacy Studies

Early conceptualizations of literacy narrowly focused on the requisite knowledge, skills, and behaviors for designing and perceiving written texts (Comber & Cormack, 1997). This early autonomous model of literacy assumes that the ability to read and write affects other social and cognitive processes (Street, 2005). The autonomous model of literacy is related to the *literacy myth*—the notion that the development of these skills autonomously transforms an individual’s cognition and leads to social, economic, and cultural prosperity (Graff, 1979). Therefore, early programs of literacy based on the autonomous model sought to isolate and ultimately improve these skills for individuals and societies.

Referred to as the *social turn* (Gee, 2000), this autonomous model was disrupted by studies in psychology (Scribner & Cole, 2014/1981), literacy studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984), and the ethnography of communication (Heath, 1983). These studies collectively demonstrated how particular forms of literacy are situated in social domains, such as families, schools, faith communities, commerce, and workplaces. These studies demonstrated how multiple forms of literacy shape and are shaped by social practices within and across these social domains in terms of their value and practical use. As a result, the social turn was a turn away from the autonomous model of literacy as a neutral set of skills

and a turn toward the ideological model of literacy. The ideological model subsumes the autonomous model and considers how multiple literacies are situated within social and cultural practices and are underpinned by particular ideologies (Street, 2003). Researchers following the social turn in literacy studies collected under the name New Literacy Studies to signal this new way of conceptualizing literacy as a social practice, while attending to the power relations literacy practices implicate (Street, 1995).

Comber and Cormack (1997) built on the ideological model of literacy focusing on power relations implicated by the kinds of texts acceptable within particular social domains. Specifically, they considered classroom settings where certain kinds of events and practices related to literacy are the norm and others are not. On a micro-level, educators determine which literacy practices correspond with target competencies in school settings; in doing so, educators sanction particular social and cultural practices involving literacy while marginalizing others. The literacy practices sanctioned by schools tend to map on to social and cultural practices of the dominant culture (white, middle class). As a consequence, students who do not represent the dominant culture and enact unsanctioned literacy practices are considered in a deficit perspective compared to the norm. Too often, educators and leaders at educational institutions chalk up the differences between the sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices within the processes of schooling to the failing of individual students who do not represent the dominant culture. Comber and Cormack (1997) suggested that teachers need to evaluate which texts and literacy practices they privilege in their classrooms, as well as the extent to which students may use these literacy practices in their current or future lives. Furthermore, they advocate for rendering students' literacy practices that do not map on to the dominant culture within an asset perspective, thereby validating and sustaining literacy practices and identities affiliated with social domains, such as home and popular culture. Additionally, teachers should support stu-

dents in critically evaluating how and why to adapt, adopt, resist, or reject literacy practices affiliated with social domains unfamiliar to them.

### Critical Literacies and Pedagogies

The social turn in literacy studies allowed for a consideration of how literacy practices were enacted in social domains outside the classroom. In a review of literacy studies conducted in homes, schools, and after-school programs, Schultz and Hull (2008) highlighted how this research demonstrated that students can learn and enact complex literacy practices in out-of-school settings while being considered unsuccessful in school settings given the narrow view of what counts as sanctioned literacy practices. Hull and Schultz (2002) also considered that understanding students' literacy practices is more complex than an inside- and out-of-school binary. Students' social domains overlap, and they enact literacy practices within and across multiple settings, such as by enacting literacy practices affiliated with popular culture within school settings or enacting literacy practices affiliated with school at home.

This consideration of how students learn to enact literacy practices within and across settings is directly relevant to student affairs practice, since that practice's primary concern is helping students learn in contexts outside of the classroom and linking that learning with the academic knowledge gained in the classroom (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). Additionally, this consideration provides insights into the relationships among literacy practices sanctioned in both high schools and colleges as well as the literacy practices students bring along with them from social domains not directly affiliated with traditional schooling (e.g., home, faith community, popular culture). Because circulations of power shape these relationships, there is a need for literacy practices and pedagogies informed by critical theory.

Critical literacy as a whole is "a philosophy that recognizes the connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the in-



equalities and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice” (Mulcahy, 2008, p.16). At its core, critical literacy outlines a way of enacting literacy practices that seek to redress social inequities. Social and cultural practices shape the ways critical literacy is enacted within and across multiple domains. Researchers acknowledge variations in the ways critical literacy is situated within particular social domains by using the plural form of the term: critical literacies (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Learning opportunities that support the development and enactment of critical literacies that critique and redress inequities and power asymmetries are forms of critical pedagogy. McArthur (2010) describes the commonalities among the varied definitions of critical pedagogy across the literature. She suggests that “the relationship between pedagogy and politics is two way; not only is pedagogy political, but pedagogy provides the knowledge and abilities through which individuals can see themselves as political agents and act accordingly” (McArthur, 2010, p. 304). Critical pedagogy centers the power imbalances present in communities and seeks to make the learning process a liberatory one for both the teacher and the student through its relationship with social engagement and action.

Critical literacy research and scholarship over the decades have supported social transformation. Rogers and O’Daniels (2015), for example, reviewed the literature on critical literacy education over the course of about two decades (1990–2012). They explained that the publication of critical literacy education-related research expanded exponentially over these years. In particular, 2010–2012 marked the most substantial increase, as well as a major shift toward empirical research from primarily theoretical or classroom practice-based scholarship. Honing in on studies from 2012 only, the authors identified three particularly active areas of scholarship, including (a) how critical literacies expand access and transform power, (b) how critical literacy is a form of social justice, and (c) how critical literacy is a form of dialogic engagement.

These themes indicate increasing attention to the transformative aspects of critical literacy, and there is great potential for student affairs educators to consider the relevance of these aspects in learning contexts outside of the classroom.

During the later period reviewed by Rogers and O’Daniels (2015), Janks (2010) introduced the interdependent model of critical literacy, which relies on four concepts: domination (who holds power and over whom), access (who has access to what knowledge and how), diversity (differences between people), and design (the production [construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction] of text). In Janks’s (2010) view, critical literacy is flexible and open when viewed through these intersecting theoretical frames, and the model is interdependent because removing any one of the four components leads to the reinforcement of the status quo.

The underlying principles of the interdependent model are based on interrogations of societal systems of power, privilege, and inequity that go beyond institutions or age groups. For example, Janks (2019) discussed the notions of reading *with* a text and reading *against* a text. Reading with texts requires readers to “understand the positions on offer, follow and engage with writers’ arguments, and be willing to consider their standpoints and ideas” (Janks, 2019, p. 561), while reading against texts requires readers to ask critical questions of texts that call into question the arguments and positions such that the underlying premise would be disagreement with the text. She ultimately argued that readers have to take a stand with or against (or some combination thereof) a text through careful consideration of all of the information they have gained from the exercise and that critique should not be the end of the process. As a social justice framework, critical literacy seeks social change, not just social critique, and to do so, students need the capacity to understand and to critique.

Critical literacy provides a platform for student affairs educators to consider how the social practices they engage in or expect students to engage in, em-

power or disempower learners. In the next section, we synthesize the theoretical principles above by exploring the connections between critical literacy and student affairs practice.

### **Bridging Critical Literacy to the Student Affairs Context**

Despite the lack of literature available within the student affairs context, critical literacies appear to be enacted and have value beyond the college and university classroom. Simply enter a college campus to see students, faculty, and staff engaging with film, literature, poetry, music, and other semiotic systems as a means for interrogating systems of power and inequity and, moreover, using the skills they gain from these experiences to advocate for social change. Nevertheless, there is a need both for research in this area and for theoretical guidance in terms of how best to make use of critical literacy as critical pedagogy in student affairs education. Therefore, the remainder of this article seeks to bridge the theories described above to the work of student affairs educators whose work primarily takes place outside of the classroom.

The need to consider the role of critical literacy in this context is particularly relevant as colleges and universities shift toward curricular approaches to learning outside of the classroom with learning goals and objectives that are mapped to strategies across students' college trajectory (Hannah & Ellis, 2018; Kerr et al., 2017). As students enter institutions of higher education conditioned by the prescriptive nature of their secondary school experiences, student affairs educators should seek to expand students' minds rather than giving in to the pressure to provide easy answers easily checked off on a survey. As Hannah and Ellis (2018) forewarned, the use of "traditional forms of literacy" (p. 14) and the attention to well-defined and quantifiable outcomes may have the potential to stifle creativity. They suggest student affairs practitioners "offer students opportunities to make meaning from their educational experiences in the myriad ways available to them, and to help them stand up

beside that work, not just as submitters of reports but as makers of beautiful things" (Hannah & Ellis, 2018, p. 14). Student affairs educators should attend to the knowledges students bring with them and how those knowledges interact with and transform what higher education offers.

A critical literacy lens also brings into question some of the assumptions of curricular approaches, particularly their goal of supporting students in the development of certain skills, knowledge, and behaviors. One must wonder about the skills student affairs practitioners are teaching college students outside of the classroom through student affairs education and whether they are, in fact, skills, social practices, or both. Perhaps, then, some of the broader learning goals in student affairs, such as helping students develop citizenship, may look different depending on the institutional context and other sociocultural and geopolitical aspects of the environment in which they are taught. By attending to the multiple literacies and related identities that students bring with them in relation to the literacies valued in educational settings, educators make room for students' creativity and create opportunities for the true co-creation of knowledge (Street, 2003). Indeed, institutions and the markers of what it means to succeed as a student within them can even be meaningfully and fundamentally transformed through such active participation from students. Curricular approaches can help legitimize and advance the work of student affairs education in the eyes of upper-level university administrators, which may help expand access to funding and other resources, for example, but this should not be done at the cost of devaluing what students bring to the experience.

### **A Critical Literacy Approach to Student Affairs Practice**

For the authors, this article is merely the beginning of a conversation about the place of critical literacy in learning contexts beyond the undergraduate classroom. Indeed, student affairs education contexts

may very well benefit from considering more broadly the educational priorities and learning goals they seek to support students in achieving, but there is more to the higher education experience than knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

College students regularly engage with semiotic systems to make meaning of their experiences. Such engagement is most obvious in classrooms, where professors typically require students to read and write in the service of intellectual development. Yet, college students regularly engage with the practices of reading and writing, both literally and more liberally defined, in their lives beyond the classroom. Examples include texting and emailing; reading, writing, and performing music; reading and writing poetry or watching and listening to a slam poet; attending a film series or simply going to the movies; analyzing the body language of a date or friend; reading or writing a pleasant, deflating, or discriminatory note on a whiteboard on a residence hall room door; reading, writing, or discussing a performance evaluation at a part-time job; and so on.

Such semiotic processing and engagement naturally follow into the student affairs context—in residence halls and campus apartments, student leadership seminars, student group meetings, service-learning projects, and more. Furthermore, the knowledge, skills, and behaviors with which student affairs professionals are concerned have different meanings on different campuses. In other words, the sociocultural context matters when making sense of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors expected of students. College students' interaction with the various literacies of the higher education environment is an ever-present influence on their engagement in the student affairs context. Thus, we suggest that literacy, in its more recent definition as a social practice, has a role to play in student affairs education.

As an example, in a previous role, Brian designed a set of one-on-one questions for student resident assistants to ask their residents about social identities. At first, one of the learning goals was that students

should be able to compare and contrast their experiences with those of students with different social identities. Imagine instead a housing and residence life department that applies the interdependent model to its residential curriculum. Upon further analysis, this learning goal stemmed almost entirely from Brian's experience as a white person who came to terms with social identities through similar questions in college. While his learning goal and the resulting set of questions may have benefited some students, they may not have benefited all students in the same way. How might the core vocabulary at the basis of these questions take on a different meaning for students with marginalized identities when being asked by resident assistants with dominant identities? And, how might this meaning-making process feel or not feel voluntary when guided by those who ostensibly hold power over them (both exerting dominance in their roles as resident assistants and through their social power)? How might it look and feel for those students who already have access to the knowledge and skills required to make meaning from this language and process versus for those who do not?

While empowering students to become aware and make sense of their social identities is a worthy goal on the surface, this goal relies on a false narrative that students come to college as blank slates, rather than considering the fullness of their diversity. Some students, particularly those with marginalized identities, may arrive already aware of the effects of domination and power on their lives and on the world. By building a curriculum around this assumption and without seeking out and incorporating an understanding of who students *already* are, Brian created an issue of access by designing an experience that revokes students' agency as they feel forced to participate in something either unhelpful or even harmful. Seeking out knowledge of identity development or conducting a survey, focus groups, or even one-on-one conversations with students could have shed light on students' current understandings and revealed opportunities for deeper learning. By choosing not to design a residential cur-

riculum alongside students, departmental leaders exert their power and dominance in ways that maintain the status quo.

Thus, the interdependent model provides a lens for critiquing and transforming the design of learning experiences (Janks, 2010) and the means to be intentional and consistent when doing so (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Through this reflection, the learning goal in the example above shifted toward one of developing critical awareness of one's multiple identities and their relationship with systems of power, privilege, and oppression. For Brian, this act of transformation meant involving students in the design of learning outcomes and examining the role of the social practice of one-on-one interactions in achieving those outcomes. Brian found that he had to take extra care with students with marginalized identities by creating space for dialogue as well as by making clear how that dialogue was substantively transforming the process. He accomplished this by offering multiple avenues, purposes, and strategies for engaging in the learning process as well as opportunities for student participants to serve as facilitators.

Brian was surprised at how difficult this process was for him. He had become used to the redistribution of power in classroom contexts, but he found that it felt strangely different in the context of supervision. Despite years of viewing his work in student affairs as an educator, it was challenging to unlearn the hierarchical nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, even with student staff, since that relationship is embedded in institutional and structural processes, such as employee evaluations. Still, through surveys, focus groups, and simple one-on-one dialogues with his staff and students, the one-on-one interactions evolved beyond simply teaching knowledge, skills, and abilities to student participants. Student participants seized the opportunity to critique and transform that social practice by questioning the one-on-one process itself and offering alterations and alternatives for learning and change, such as intergroup dialogues, service projects, and reflective prac-

tices. The one-on-one interactions also evolved to be more dialogic rather than interview style.

It follows, then, that the use of critical literacy as a critical pedagogy can support student learning as it pertains to developing an awareness of social inequity and developing the desire and will to engage in transformative action for social justice. Language is core to understanding and engaging in social justice work. Ahmed (2012) argues, for example, that universities have shifted their language from *equity* to *diversity* partly because equity suggests too literally what the aim of social justice movements is; in contrast, diversity can be obscured within the broader business model that drives the modern higher education institution. Stewart (2017) further suggests that through such rhetoric, historically white institutions "have appeased their constituents and avoided recognizable institutional change" (para. 11). As a result, people can speak the right words, such as "diversity," in conversations seemingly related to transformative change despite these conversations containing nothing critical, in the sense of interrogating and changing structures of power.

We mean here to suggest that critical literacy can support the aims of social justice in higher education because, at its core, it is about the meaningful analysis and advancement of social justice. This vision for social justice in higher education connects well to the professional competencies put forth by ACPA and NASPA's (2015) revised professional competency social justice and inclusion, which they define "as both a process and a goal which includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups while seeking to address and acknowledge issues of oppression, privilege, and power" (p. 14). Pope et al. (2019) further argue that multicultural competence, social justice, and inclusion are not only standalone competencies but should also be infused with all other professional competencies within the field of student affairs. In our view, critical literacy can provide nuance and pathways for achieving this goal.

## Conclusion

In this article, we presented theory and research related to student affairs education and critical literacy in higher education. While the literature is severely limited where these two areas overlap, there is considerable promise in working toward a unified theory of critical literacy as critical pedagogy in student affairs education. There is no universal model—and there likely will never be—for designing anti-oppressive and liberatory learning experiences in student affairs contexts. Student affairs practitioners must, as Jones and Stewart (2016) put it, “practice intentional and consistent interdisciplinary engagement by directing our theorizing toward liberatory and healing ends” (p. 25). Unfortunately, researchers and practitioners have been slow in adopting the frameworks and advances in the field of education, more broadly, and in the learning sciences, specifically, despite calls to do so from leaders in the field (e.g., Stauffer & Kimmel, 2019).

Our review of the literature on student affairs education and critical literacy suggests that there is much potential for transformative work to come from jointly considering these areas. Student affairs practitioners may adapt Janks’s (2010) interdependent model, for example, to the higher education and student affairs context. Janks (2010) warned her readers, however, not to depend entirely on the interdependent model because it ignores the psychological aspects of learning and over-rationalizes the human experience. In particular, there is a danger that a focus on critical literacy as critical pedagogy, even with attention to the four interdependent principles, can lead to students learning how to perform a social practice as expected without acting for social change. We provide an example by following up on Brian’s earlier illustration of a career center focused on conceptions of professionalism aligned with dominant perspectives.

As Brian sought to help students critique and transform their conceptions of professional dress, his

earliest attempts were in line with the interdependent model in theory, but the result was often a more informed student population who continued to choose the status quo when it came to professional dress. One part of the problem was his choice of dressing according to the status quo, even as he participated in these discussions. Still, even if he had chosen to present himself differently, for many students with marginalized identities, choosing to dress against the status quo makes them a target of discrimination, harassment, and violence. Brian faced this very challenge in his own decisions about how to dress. There is merit in considering the sociocultural context of learning and its relationship to the literacies of students and student affairs education, but he had, as Janks (2010) warned against, ignored the psychological aspects of learning.

Reflecting on these psychological aspects in future versions of workshops and panels about professionalism in the workplace, Brian chose to open up about his own emotional struggles and ensure that organizers included opportunities for students to share their own experiences as a means for deconstructing and reconstructing their environment (Janks, 2010; Watt, 2015). Still, for some students, this was not enough. For example, trans students did not suddenly open up in these dialogues simply because Brian was open about his experiences with professionalism. Instead, he found that he needed to consciously design how he participated in these workshops and panels as well as how he advocated within his professional capacity at the institution with trans students in mind. Brian continues to work toward more appropriate ways to incorporate psychological components of learning with critical literacy in order to enhance students’ learning experiences. At times, this means incorporating into learning activities emotional check-ins through private reflective journaling or dialogue. At other times, it means introducing identity development models to students or reflecting, either publicly or privately, on where he is on his own identity development journey in particularly tough moments of dissonance.



In a unique way, student affairs scholarship and practice are situated in a theoretical space that straddles the psychological and sociocultural, thereby offering the potential to bridge the divide perceived by Janks (2010). The field's articulation of student development theory has advanced significantly through over a century of research and practice, but how we put this theory into practice can benefit from a pedagogy centered on critical frameworks and engaged in the interdisciplinarity called for above. This article provides only a beginning for the consideration of the role of literacy as a social practice in student affairs. Still, as we have shown, critical literacy, as an approach to student affairs education, brings with it many possibilities for new practices and lines of research that center transformative, anti-oppressive, and liberatory learning outside of the classroom.

### Final Reflections

As we worked on this article together, we found it difficult to bring our multiple identities into the conversation as a student affairs practitioner and a literacy researcher who have worked to center social justice within our respective educational philosophies. We understand the value of self-reflection, yet centering ourselves and our experience can feel like centering whiteness—something we work against in our daily work. However, critical literacy provides a framework for reflection on our experience as a means for de-centering whiteness. The interdependent model allows us to use self-reflection to examine who benefits and who suffers from how power is distributed, who has access to what knowledge in what ways, and how differences among people shape the production of text. Reading with and against our own work as social justice educators and advocates led us to re-examine our involvement in and power over social justice efforts, as described in the examples above. It is the act of examining and reading against our whiteness that works toward de-centering that dominant part of our identities.

This examining can be applied in various ways to

other parts of our multiple identities. For Brian, particularly earlier in his career, he found that he used his queer identity as a shield when (or to avoid) talking about race, failing to focus on the differences that did not directly impact him. He focused on domination, access, and design, but his experience and insight limited his attention to diversity. For Ryan, throughout his career, he has found it difficult to have conversations about racism that de-center whiteness with students and colleagues. A particular issue of continued attention for Ryan is shifting conversations about racism among students and faculty from an issue that white people empathize with toward an issue that white people need to address in relationship to their own complicity. We have found that ignoring the role of whiteness only further centers it. We consider the components of the independent model as guidelines for continuing to develop our critical literacy work. However, the model also provides a framework and a foundation against which student affairs practitioners can interrogate our intentions, action, and impact before, during, and after educational experiences.

The work of deconstructing and reconstructing the social and literacy practices that make up the student affairs profession and programs will always be a work in progress. In our experience, critical literacy is not a panacea; integrating it into the work of student affairs will not solve our institutions' problems with power, privilege, or oppression. However, critical literacy can provide tools for designing learning experiences that critique and transform both the system and the parts we each play in enacting the social practices that make up this system.

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