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Recommended Citation

Gouthro, Patricia A.; Holloway, Susan M.; and Careless, Erin J.. (2012). Critical Literacies and Democratic Learning: Using Fiction Reading and Writing to Engage in Lifelong Learning Connected to Citizenship. *CASAE: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, 2012, 138-144.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/educationpub/38>

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Critical Literacies and Democratic Learning: Using Fiction Reading and Writing to Engage in Lifelong Learning Connected to Citizenship

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Abstract: Drawing upon research from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) study looking at connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and the craft of writing fiction, this paper explore the possibilities of fostering critical literacies and democratic learning opportunities. The paper explores the concept of critical literacies, discusses some of the insights provided by participants in the study with regards to how a critical approach to understanding fiction may foster democratic learning, and discusses strategies for fostering critical literacies amongst learners.

Introduction

If, as Brookfield and Holst (2010) assert, one of the main objectives for educators should be to work towards creating democratic learning opportunities that encourages learners to pay attention to the needs of those who are less privileged, then it is important for educators to consider strategies to engage learners to think deeply and critically about the societies in which they live. A critical literacy framework (Huang, 2011; Lapp & Fisher, 2010) challenges learners to think about the social, cultural and political contexts that frame issues that they may be reading about and considers how learners may be encouraged to think about writing in critical and creative ways. Drawing upon a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded study that examines connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing, this paper focuses on what is meant by the term “critical literacies”, examines how fostering critical literacies is an important component of developing the capacity for active and engaged citizens, and finishes with some strategies to facilitate learning that may encourage critical literacies connected to fiction reading and writing.

Critical Literacies

Critical literacies draw attention to power relationships that exist within reading and writing texts. Lapp & Fisher (2010) explain that “critical literacy is the practice of evaluating information, insights and perspectives through an analysis of power, culture, class and gender” (p. 159). They point out the value of having learners consider how different perspectives can be explored and debated. Huang (2011) discusses how developing the capacity for critical literacies may encourage students to develop “conscious reading” skill that involves “considering multiple ways of viewing an issue” (p. 150). Some of the benefits of this are that students may then be more open to considering alternative frameworks for understanding, and may also be more motivated to write themselves as a way to express their own perspectives or viewpoints. While discussions around critical literacy often focus on learning within formal education and school-based settings (Harvard-Hinchburger, 2006; Wilner, 2005), critical literacies can also be fostered

in community-based and adult learning contexts, such as can be seen in the project by Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinsons (2008) where they worked with incarcerated women to creatively write plays for theatre performances.

Critical literacy critiques the relationships between power, language, and knowledge. Language is understood from a critical literacy viewpoint as always embedded in historical, political, and social contexts, which influence how and why certain discourses are privileged over others. For example, author Roy Miki talks about his writing as heavily embedded in his experiences during the Japanese Internment: *“I’ve had to grapple with the effects of internment, psychologically, emotionally, historically... and politically. A lot of my writing stems from it, and in part it’s the thing that motivated me to write... It has both allowed me to write and it also challenged me to go beyond it”*. Through fiction, readers and writers can explore important social issues, consider historical factors that have shaped their environment, and consider alternative perspectives and frameworks for understanding.

Learning for Democracy

Adult educators often assert the importance of preparing learners to engage in democratic contexts by addressing strategies to enhance dialogical and critical approaches to learning. Bagnell (2010) takes up some of the debates around engaged and active citizenship, noting that this is often linked with learning around “knowledge such as that of the nature of democratic processes and their informing procedural values, and the skills involved in networking, collaborating, arguing, researching issues, and advocating positions” (p. 451). Learning connected to creating more active or engaged citizenship may involve participation in civil society, in community contexts, in cyberspace, or in public spaces such as libraries (Welton, 2005; Irving & English, 2011; Kranich, 2010). It may involve engagement in feminist arts-based approaches that use theatre or fabric arts/crafts (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Clover & Stalker, 2008), or, as we argue, it may be taken up through other formal or informal opportunities for learning, such as through reading or writing fiction.

Through fiction reading and writing, there is the potential to encourage learners to explore alternative perspectives, to gain insights into social, political and cultural problems located within their country as well as within other societies, and to foster a more reflective approach to understanding how individuals negotiate their roles and identities within any particular society. Critical literacies involve developing the capacity to critically assess some of the ways in which power is infused through all learning and life contexts.

Using a critical literacy approach involves making educators aware of how certain epistemologies get counted and others get marginalized. As we prepare our students to teach in various contexts, it is important that we help them to see as educators that language is value-laden and worth analyzing to better identify and comprehend ideological assumptions grounded in everyday discourses. Gee (1990, 2008) notes the meanings of words “vary across contexts” and are “tied to cultural models” and must to some extent always be negotiated in the context of social interactions (p. 10). Our everyday assumptions around language and how we interpret reality may be challenged if we are presented with alternative perspectives through reading, writing, debating and sharing ideas through the use of fiction.

Understanding the subtleties and complexities of language is important if educators are to help foster democratic learning contexts. Giroux (2005) gives an example from the US, although his point may be applicable to a Canadian context, in which he argues that citizens seem to be sometimes severed from the tools of language which could better serve them:

The United States is increasingly marked by a poverty of critical public discourse, making it more difficult for the American people to appropriate a critical language outside of the market that would allow them to link private problems to public concerns and issues (p. 3).

This capacity to make these kinds of linkages, or to develop a sociological imagination whereby students can make connections between individual problems with social structural issues, involves developing abstract and complex thinking processes. The ability to move beyond localized, personal concerns, to be able to understand broader social contexts is beneficial, if democratic learning is to occur. Through fiction, although one reads or writes a tale that focuses on the circumstances of particular individuals, through critical analysis, discussion, and debate, connections to these broader societal and cultural issues can be revealed and explored in depth.

Fostering critical language that serves to promote social justice issues, both in thought and deed, is a primary tenet of critical literacy. As Giroux points out then, “critical public discourse” is key to adult educators promoting amongst the greater population a dialogue, which beckons members of society to believe that true democracy, rather than the hollowed out version currently produced through neoliberal forces, is feasible. Similarly, Brookfield and Holst (2010) argue that social justice issues need to be at the forefront of democratic debate.

In order to take up these concerns, adult educators need to be concerned with how they can provide more sophisticated levels of understanding and analysis amongst their learners. Language, and the tools of critical literacies are important considerations. “There can be no liberation of the self or other,” says Morrell, “without tools or language to perform counter-readings of dominant texts that serve the interests of power” (p. 114). Through reading and writing fiction, learners can also explore the different nuances and meanings of words, and consider how we “paint a picture” of the world through various images, scenes, and dialogue. This knowledge can then be used in other reading and writing contexts, to foster deeper and richer literacies, to enable learners to engage critically as citizens.

The New London Group (2000) call for civic pluralism, whereby the role of the state is to “arbitrate difference” and where social order differences “are negotiated in such a way that they complement each other, and where people have the chance to expand their cultural and linguistic repertoires so that they can access a broader range of cultural and institutional resources” (p. 15). As educators, our role is to help prepare learners to participate actively as literate and knowledgeable citizens, able to work dialogically to resolve differences. This study explores some of the ways in which fiction reading and writing can help to develop the capacities of learners to understand and engage in democratic society.

Research Study

The SSHRC study includes over thirty interviews with authors from across Canada, as well as a smaller number from the US and the UK, for cross-cultural comparison. The authors range from emerging writers to well-established and recognized authors, who write primarily either in literary fiction, crime fiction, or in children/YA (young adult) fiction. Interviews from “key informants” in publishing, government and educational sectors have been included to provide insights into the programs and supports that exist to support Canadian fiction writing.

Fiction Reading and Writing

Reading and writing fiction provides many opportunities for learners to consider important issues pertaining to citizenship. Author Christine Walde explains, *“In many ways, books are like mirrors into who we are, who we want to be, who we don't want to be.”* Using a critical literacy framework, readers can debate the importance of what Canadian novels tell us about our country, whether in a classroom, a coffee shop, or at a book club. Reading fiction from a range of authors opens up discussion around the idea of a “Canadian voice” in considering who is represented in Canadian literature. Educators can introduce students to Aboriginal authors, Newcomers, writers diverse in geographic locations, age, gender, and sexual orientation. By reading fiction it becomes clear that Canadians are representative of many cultures, religions, and lifestyles. This, as literary author Emma Donoghue explains, may lead to consideration around citizenship and identity: *“So having been through this immigration process twice myself, moving first to England and then to Canada, I'm really intrigued as to what that does to people's lives and their identities.”*

Reading from a broad spectrum and from different cultural and social perspectives can help challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that we hold, thus encouraging both critical thinking and awareness. Being aware of social inequities is the first step to changing them. Educators who draw upon a critical literacy framework can build upon this awareness, by encouraging learners to think about social, political, cultural and economic factors that motivate characters' actions, shape dialogue, and influence plot development.

Fostering Critical Literacies

There are a number of different strategies using fiction reading and writing to foster a critical literacy approach that may enhance democratic learning opportunities. By examining fiction, learners may have opportunities to reflect upon different ways for handling conflict, communication, and negotiation. Even children can be encouraged to think about why a particular character may approach a problem from a different position, and consider why conflict may arise and how it may be resolved – important dialogical skills that need to be developed as citizens in a democracy. For example, in reflecting upon how as an author she looks at plot and character development, Education professor and children's author Kari-Lynn Winters explains:

Typically you'll have a character that starts out wanting something, has a desire for something. They'll do something about it, there's some sort of action that is initiated by the character and will not sit well with another character in the book. You usually get a minor reaction, and because the character still hasn't received their goal yet, they're going to keep on pursuing that goal even if they don't want it

anymore. So they're going to keep on doing these sort of actions. They might say one thing and really want something else.

In addition to discussing why a character might behave a certain way, learners can also be asked to think about why an author might have a character behave a certain way – what kind of problem is the author trying to highlight? How might the author have developed the story in a different way? Through critical questions such as these, learners can be encouraged to deepen their capacity for analysis and debate- important skills for democratic citizens.

Wilner (2005) discusses the importance of carefully designing assignments to encourage learners to move beyond simply thinking that everyone's opinion is equally valid, so that students are challenged to think about deeper moral issues. Huang (2011) argues for the need to think "beyond the text" to consider broader social and cultural contexts around issues that are brought up in fiction writing. Canadian programs that match immigrant or rural youth with established writing mentors provide opportunities for teens and young adults to find their own "voices" and think about how their writing can explore issues pertaining to citizenship.

It is important that different voices are heard often in fiction writing, as this serves to challenge inequity on a deeper level as well. Crime fiction author Frankie Bailey discussed the lack of celebrated African American authors in this genre in particular. She believes that *"it's very hard if you're a member of a minority group to write a book that's going to involve only people of your group – especially when you're writing about the criminal justice system in modern times"*. Because of marginalization in society, Bailey feels that *"any time you're the 'other', you spend so much time observing the dominant group that you have an advantage in terms of creating characters"*. Bailey's comments reflect the argument made by theorists who argue that through standpoint epistemology, individuals who are in peripheral positions often have an epistemological advantage, in that they can view things from a unique and privileged position. Using fiction may be one way to illustrate this point for learners.

In addition to critiquing existing social orders, the New London Group (2000) are important for their work in suggesting how critical literacy plays a role in envisioning a creative forces to shape the future design of our world. They coined the term "multiliteracies" which refers to the interconnected, dialogic nature of texts that criss-cross modalities of print, technology, semiotics, orality, and visual arts, to name just a few. Or, put another way, multiliteracies is defined as the "multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral" (p. 61). So within the field of critical literacy, there is interest in the aesthetics of art (including creative writing) as a form of counter-hegemony. Brookfield (2010), drawing upon the ideas of Marcuse, expands this point: "The political significance of art is that it helps us make this break with the ordinary and gives us new forms of visual and spoken language that open us to new ways of sensing and feeling" (p. 146).

Multi-literacies also include media literacies, through films, the internet, and other technological forums for communication. Increasingly fiction is available not just through books, but also on e-readers, and through forums such as "fan fiction" sites on the internet where readers go in and write their own scenarios and endings for characters that they are interested in. Children's author Peter Cumming reflects:

I can't fathom young people growing up today who really have access to the whole world through the internet. I can just barely imagine how empowering and exciting that is because I know for me that was through books. Through reading "Leaves of Grass" or Lin Yutang on "The Importance of Living" or whatever it was. It opened up whole worlds to me.

Computers provide a means by which individuals who wish to write can post their stories, exchange ideas with other interested writers, and even look at “indie-publishing” – where they may try to market their own work through outlets such as Amazon. Although the authors included in this study were all published through traditional routes, many participants discussed the impact of changing technologies on publication opportunities. At writing conferences, there is also a great deal of discussion around the significant impact of new technologies to provide alternative venues for publication and for authors to communicate with each other and with readers.

As educators, there are many ways that we can foster multi-literacies with regards to fiction. We can use the internet to explore writing sites and learn about different authors. We can consider using you-tube videos, social media and forums to encourage discussion and dialogue. Years Steven & Brown (2011) give the example of using blogging in a classroom context to help students learn about the holocaust. Irving & English (2011) look at how adults in community contexts may engage in learning related to social movements through establishing connections in cyberspace. Adult educators in community contexts can also use creative approaches to foster critical forms of learning that may use other forms of publication to support learning. For example, Cameron (2011) uses the creation of “zines” by young rural women as a form of community-based education to look at concerns related to depression.

Final Thoughts

There is no easy recipe to create thoughtful, critical and engaged citizens, but an important part of our work as educators is to consider the kinds of learning that will cultivate democratic capacities amongst our students. If we are to encourage the development of critical literacies, we need to think widely and deeply about our goals as educators. This research project points to the some of the valuable opportunities for learning that may be developed in connection to reading and writing fiction that may foster these kinds of literacies, and ultimately, one hopes, these kinds of citizens.

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