

12-30-2015

Critical Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom: A Case for the 21st Century

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Recommended Citation

Pohl, Bernardo E. jr and Beaudry, Christine (2015) "Critical Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom: A Case for the 21st Century,"
Journal of Family Strengths: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol15/iss2/4>

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Introduction

The authors have both worked and observed in schools where literacy was taught in isolation. Students are learning literacy; however, literacy is seldom used to foster critical thinking. Too often, literacy is viewed narrowly as consisting solely of a set of technical and functional knowledge and skills. Similarly, social studies are often also perceived as consisting primarily of names, places, and dates. Neither of these approaches promotes and supports the critical thinking that is essential for learners in the twenty-first century. However, both literacy and social studies offer potential as powerful ways to develop critical thinking, and in their professional practices, the authors have encountered instances where this has been occurring. Students are learning meaningful forms of engagement through historical fiction, movies, and provocative questioning. Critical approaches to literacy and social studies can be used as a tool for critical thinking that encourages students to investigate and analyze complex social and global issues. This article considers how integrating literacy, social studies, and critical thinking can contribute to the development of the knowledge and skills necessary for today's learners. The purpose of the article is to explore how critical and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning literacy and social studies can be united to promote and support the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed by today's diverse learners if they are to successfully navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected global society.

Current economic, social, political, and environmental realities cannot be ignored. This is the era of exponential changes, when the virtual world is the reality for many—a new kind of “hyper-reality” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). Recent years have witnessed immense changes in how we live our lives. This is the era of Web 2.0, social networking, and instant messaging. This is the era of viral videos, Instagram, and YouTube. This is the era when students are measuring their social acceptance by the number of “likes” and comments they receive for every post they place on social media. This is the era when the Internet is no longer a novelty, but an indispensable tool for daily life.

However, this is also a time when today's students face and will continue to face in the coming years increasingly complex challenges as future citizens and leaders with regard to the global economic, social, political, and environmental issues: income inequality and corporatizing, social inequity and displacement, political tensions and disenfranchisement, and potentially irreversible ecological damage.

Given these and other realities, education remains important as a means for preparing twenty-first-century learners to navigate the

challenges they face. As such, critical literacy provides a potentially empowering tool for critical thinking, community activism, and social justice (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011). The authors' perspectives on critical literacy are based on Freire's legacy of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2004, 2007). Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who was greatly influenced by the injustices and disparities that he witnessed in rural Brazil, including the subhuman and slave-like treatment of poor farm workers in the Amazon. He thought to change these conditions by helping the farmers to learn to read and write. He did this by facilitating their understanding of their own social and economic conditions, which meant breaking up the accepted learned norms of school and society. Freire believed that traditional education promoted apathy and a lack of action, making the learner a passive recipient of knowledge in a situation where "the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are the mere object" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). He referred to this as the *banking* form of education, in which the learner is often unaware the social forces at play and passively accepts, without questioning, his or her social condition (Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2003). As a result, Freire promoted the concept of *conscientization*, which means discovering the reality of an individual's situation and the truth of such experience (Freire, 1970, p. 109). In his case, he did this by having frank and open conversations with the rural farmers about their lives. In this fashion of education, the learner is encouraged "to name, to reflect critically, to act" (Wink, 2005, p. 3). This is encouraged through a dialectic exercise based on dialogue and questioning (Chen, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007). In their attempt to define critical pedagogy, Nieto and Bode (2012) define it as a process that "values diversity and encourages critical thinking" (p. 54).

Unfortunately, Freire's concept of *banking education* can be found in many social studies classrooms, demonstrated by evidence that many students often cite social studies as a least favorite subject. For many, social studies lack the passion, drama, and excitement of other subjects (Loewen, 2007). This can be attributed to the process of teaching the rote memorization of facts, dates, and names without any contextual analysis behind the process. Waring (2010) often describes the lack of interest, curricular confusion, and negative experiences as common areas of concern in the social studies classroom. However, alternative perspectives on teaching and learning social studies exist that emphasize how critical approaches can make this subject more relevant and more meaningful. Additionally, research suggests that critical literacy can also be successful in the classroom (Janks, 2012; Riley, 2015; Wood & Jocius, 2013), and

that social studies can benefit from integrating critical literacy approaches (Aldrich, 2010; MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011; Wolk, 2003).

Literacy and the Twenty-first Century

Historically, literacy has often been regarded as the ability to read and write properly. This implies the mastery of knowledge and skills that enable an individual to read a book and write a sentence. The current field of U.S. education places great emphasis on reading and writing as indispensable literacy skills. Additionally, educators and administrators view these skills as competencies that should be properly acquired and evaluated (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011). However, despite its importance, current practices often view literacy as a separate subject, rather than as one that is interwoven across the curricular landscape (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011). This is reflected in the standards, curricula, and evaluation practices, especially standardized and high-stakes testing, that many states have developed and implemented for teaching and assessing proficiency in reading and writing. As a result, many districts and schools devote significant resources, time, and personnel to the compartmentalized teaching and learning of literacy as a separate and distinct set of technical and functional knowledge and skills (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011). However, the importance vested in the proper learning of reading and writing skills as an isolated subject has often meant the relegation of other subjects to a secondary status in the classrooms; as a result, administrators, faculty, and even students often no longer perceive other subjects as important and valuable, with the exception of math, which receives similar emphasis. This has caused the appropriation of time and resources allocated for other subjects, notably science and social studies, to the teaching of reading and writing skills for the sole purpose of enabling students to pass a test (Paquette & Kaufman, 2008). Additionally, research suggests that the teaching and learning of literacy as an isolated subject that focuses merely on the mechanics of reading and writing tends to diminish, not increase, the active participation and engagement of students in their educational setting (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011).

However, Keefe and Copeland (2011) observe that literacy has several definitions, and that these divergent understandings lead individuals to experience literacy differently. Some perceive literacy as a fundamental human right and as essential to community building (Keefe & Copeland, 2011). Such understandings view literacy as the exercise of acting on the “written text” for achieving full participation in society (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 93). These are rich conceptions that promote more

enticing and attractive approaches to defining and understanding literacy as integrally connected to life and experience. In that regard, Keefe and Copeland assert that functional or technical approaches to literacy impede more meaningful understandings (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 95). These and other perspectives on literacy provide an opportunity to transcend traditional understandings in an effort to consider the potential for literacy as a basis to promote and support critical thinking skills that are essential for twenty-first-century learners living in a complex and global society. Literacy can also be understood as a critical and reflective process that entails knowing one's position in the world and the reality of that position (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 2003), as well as the ability to actively critique the circumstances surrounding that reality (McLaren, 1980). This is what many call critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 2003). As Wolk (2003) observes:

To strive to have one's students be critically literate is to have an entirely different vision from that of the person aiming to have students be technically literate with the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. Critical literacy is about how we see and interact with the world: It is about having, as a regular part of one's life, the skills and desire to evaluate society and the world. (pp. 101–102)

Some view literacy as a political act. Luke (2012) defines critical literacy as “[the] use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 5). In his assessment, Luke highlights the need to understand the new world we live in, including the attempts by governments to control the flow of information (p. 4). Freedom, civil societies, and proper human relationships are guaranteed only when the access to knowledge is not uninterrupted (Luke, 2012). O’Quinn (2005) describes literacy as the skill required to uncover hidden political messages. In her argument, she insists that it is the duty of the teacher to help students to understand “the messages being sent” (O’Quinn, 2005, p. 281). For O’Quinn, literacy is an engaging act in which students are decoding and interpreting the persuasive techniques of information used by the dominant structures of society. What message is really being sent when the local army recruiting office is allowed to put a permanent life-size human figure display of a soldier in camouflage at the local high school? What does it mean when Coca Cola puts a vending machine inside the school’s football field

house? Literacy means questioning the source of the conversation for a meaningful “democratic conversation” (O’Quinn, 2005, p. 281).

For others, literacy means addressing the increasing cultural pluralism of U.S. and global societies (Edwards, 2010). The notion that the population of students in the United States is becoming more diverse is not new. At the same time, the teacher population continues to be largely homogeneous in comparison with shifting student demographics, with most teachers continuing to be female European-Americans who are middle class and speak only English. Therefore, there is a new urgency to address these cultural and linguistic diversities (Edwards, 2010). Kincheloe (2004) advocates for an *emancipatory* literacy, which is described as the act of people “becoming knowledgeable about their histories, experiences, and cultures” (p. 85). This is what is conceived as exploring a language of possibility. Students become equipped with the tools to decode, explore, and understand the norms and expectations of the lived environment, including the dominant forces embedded in that environment (Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005). Emancipatory literacy allows students not only to understand and celebrate their background but also to learn to understand and celebrate backgrounds that are not their own. It helps the marginalized make their own history (Kincheloe, 2004).

For Wink (2005), the notion of becoming critically literate involves “knowing, lots of knowing” (p. 48). To many, literacy means reading the word. However, for Wink, it means understanding the construction of power forces, which also includes coding and decoding power structures. According to Wink, “critical literacy recognizes that reading does not take place in a vacuum” (p. 48). Critical literacy recognizes that the word has a social, political, cultural, and historical context (Freire & Macedo, 2003). It is not enough to read the word; one must learn to read the world (Wink, 2005). For this to happen, Wink suggests that the learner must master the skills of written and oral communication, dialogue, and questioning.

Riley (2015) suggests that fostering critical literacy relies on four important characteristics: First, it must be action-driven; second, it must encourage humanizing endeavors; third, it must accept multiple perspectives; and fourth, it must be a community builder. By action-driven, Riley means that critical literacy must foster change. In other words, it must encourage participants to act on the pressing needs of society. By making critical literacy humanizing, Riley argues that emotional experiences and responses should be acknowledged and privileged in an effort to understand the contexts of those emotions (McLaren, 2003; Pohl, 2015). By accepting multiple perspectives, Riley makes the argument that

voice should be given to those who are often silenced, ignored, or forgotten (Freire, 1970). Lastly, Riley affirms that critical literacy builds communities, meaning that it must denounce individualism and foster a communal process of interconnectedness and mutual exchange and support (McLaren, 2003).

Literacy in the twenty-first century should not be narrowly defined as a separate and discrete subject comprised solely of a set of functional and technical knowledge and skills, nor should it be confined to specific courses or subject areas. Instead, it will need to be integrated across academic disciplines, including social studies (Waring, 2010). The ability to comprehend world events, have empathy for human suffering, be critical consumers, and promote a better world will be essential for the next generations of students (Cowhey, 2006). The ability to understand underlying social forces will be crucial. The need to build communities, foster collaboration, and create safe environments will be essential. Critical literacy offers the potential to serve as a tool that allows students to interpret diverse messages and information, make informed decisions, and act to positively transform society and the world. As Wolk (2003) observes:

The purpose of critical literacy is not to tell students what to think but to empower them with multiple perspectives and questioning habits and encourage them to think and take action on their decisions through dialogue, activism, and their daily decisions about how to live so that they help make a better world. (p. 102)

In the twenty-first century, students will have to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world where global societies are deeply economically, socially, politically, and environmentally linked. Thus, one goal of education should be to assist them to live in a society that is increasingly global (Cortina, 2011). Given this, it is essential that today's young people be both willing and able to contribute responsibly to the shaping of a better future in a more interdependent world (Bliss, 2003).

Critical Literacy and Social Studies

Critical literacy plays a fundamental role in social studies (Aldrich, 2010). Like perspectives on literacy, those on social studies education can vary widely. Social studies can be defined and understood in multiple and diverse ways with these conceptualizations, which are often directly tied to its purposes and desired outcomes. Narrow interpretations of social

studies often emphasize content knowledge (e.g., names, places, and dates). In the broadest sense, social studies are viewed as the inculcation of values, skills, and beliefs to produce active and productive citizens (Agbaria, 2011) who are able to be competent members of the social arena (National Council for the Social Studies Task Force, 2010). Traditionally, in schools, the teaching of civic values has been entrusted to those teaching the common social studies subjects: history, geography, government, and economics (Agbaria, 2011). Social studies are often viewed as the area of the curriculum where students learn the necessary skills that will allow them to live and work as participatory civic citizens. In response to recent global events, this debate has taken on a more urgent tone, evolving around what and how to teach in order to make students more globally aware and civically engaged (Hess & Stoddard, 2011).

Advocates of critical literacy have taken on the task of promoting an interdisciplinary approach (Bliss, 2003; Harste & Albers, 2013; Riley, 2015) in an effort to support more authentic and meaningful teaching and learning experiences. Riley (2015) suggests that critical literacy in a cross-curricular approach is self-actualizing and humanizing. Furthermore, it promotes “meaning making” and “democratic ideals” (Riley, 2015, p. 418). In that sense, fostering increased critical thinking has become an important goal. Despite agreement on the need to develop critically thinking students (Bednarz, 2003; Hess & Stoddard, 2011), debate continues as to how this should be achieved with regard to teaching and learning social studies. For some, the need is to understand the hegemonic nature of the new global economy (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005); for others, the urgency lies in understanding our new cultural diversity (Niето & Bode, 2012); still others call to ensure that our students are critically aware of the new age of governmental agendas (National Council for the Social Studies, 2014). Despite the differences in emphasis, these more critical approaches to social studies, like those to literacy, have in common the involvement of complex considerations and critiques of the world, one’s position in it, and how best to decide upon and enact changes in an effort to make the world a better place. As Wolk (2003) asserts:

At its foundation, social studies are about questioning and power, living for the common good, understanding and appreciating the past to create a better future, celebrating and encouraging diversity in perspective and culture, making daily moral judgments about how to act and what to believe,

and being informed of events and issues locally and globally.
(p. 102)

So, how might this take shape? Harste (2003) observes that critical literacy begins with having literate students, which means understanding the language and the story; they can interpret and decide how to react to a message (Harste & Albers, 2013). More and more, students are expected to learn to analyze texts (Vazquez, 2004); more importantly, they are required to analyze the voice behind the messages that they encounter in their everyday lives (Harste, 2003; Harste & Albers, 2013). In today's classroom, the result will be that students will unpack the meaning of what they are learning, analyze their experiences, and unfold their own truths.

Thus, promoting critical literacy in social studies or other areas becomes a personal act. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) reveal that such reasoning often takes the shape of narrative, which assists in mapping personal landscapes (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1996). There are many opportunities for such critical thinking to occur. Social justice is an area where such acts of critical awareness can flourish. Chapman, Hobbel, and Alvarado (2011) used narratives and diaries to explore issues of social justice among ninth-graders. As they suggest, using writing for social justice awareness promotes awareness of "social challenges" that affect the family, community, and society (Chapman et al., 2011, p. 535). Furthermore, Chapman and colleagues agree that such activity promotes a more inclusive and welcoming classroom environment. MacPhee and Whitecotton (2011) encourage the use of fictional history to explore issues of social justice. Although they argue that fiction has been used to introduce topics in social studies, the use of fiction to explore multiple perspectives and create a deeper awareness of historical events is less common (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011). In their research, they successfully used the fictional novel *Chain*, written by Laurie Halse Anderson (Anderson & Leigh, 2008), to explore multiple lives and tensions at the dawn of the American Revolution. While exploring this novel, students were able to successfully consider issues of power and tension between slaves and masters during this period (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011).

This kind of approach has many benefits. Fantozzi (2012) asserts there is an urgent need to move beyond mere content-based teaching in the social studies classroom, especially history, and to begin inquiring into the facts behind the facts. In her argument, she calls for the inclusion of more pedagogical strategies that promote critical thinking, such as student-centered lessons that promote questioning and analysis. This is a

practice that moves beyond the mere rote learning of knowledge and promotes analysis, discourses, and debate within a historical context (Keefe & Copeland, 2011). Such approaches have been successfully implemented, especially in areas of cultural studies and the predominance of whiteness in our culture, with young adult literature (Schieble, 2012). In the end, we see social studies as a tool that can successfully promote a better awareness for students, not a mere drill in memorizing facts, names, and dates.

Critical literacy also plays an integral role in this approach to social studies in the context of global citizenship in the twenty-first century. This includes promoting critical considerations of citizenship and democracy that support equity, justice, and tolerance, while seeking to develop sustainable living for all global inhabitants. Critical literacy and social studies can be integrated to equip students with the capacity to function in three key areas of global significance: economic performance, environmental protection, and social well-being (Bliss, 2003). The National Council for the Social Studies position statement, *What is global and international education?* (2014), seeks to help students understand the increasingly globalized nature of the world while promoting active participation. It suggests the implementation of classroom activities that help students understand their local position in a more globalized world. It is vital that students learn and understand the forces that shape this increased interconnectedness on a global scale (Bliss, 2003). This will require a keen understanding of what it means to be globally literate. It is not about developing specific curricular ideas, but about helping students to visualize the nature of global reality.

There are several ways that this can be approached. Students can be encouraged to consider multiple perspectives and interpretations on globalization that reflect both positive and negative effects for different groups and places. For example, they can explore the impact of manufacturing and trade agreements on corporations, consumers, workers, and the environment, and the ways in which these interactions may benefit some while harming others. This will require a new way to look at teaching and learning. As such, the introduction of cross-curricular lessons and classes is suggested (Bliss, 2003). In this manner, it is the introduction of alternative literatures, inquiry-based activities, and knowledge production, not knowledge intake (Freire, 1970), that should take precedence. Additionally, critical literacy can be integrated into social studies to promote positive values among students for equality, justice, and peace. While every generation often believes that theirs is a crucial time in history, there is evidence to suggest that the first two decades of

the twenty-first century are among the most defining years in recent history (Aldrich, 2010). Increasing ecological damage, technological changes, income inequality, and diverse societies are vivid realities of the current global landscape. Further, increased global interdependence means that economic, political, social, and environmental tensions around the world cannot be ignored. Our students are living in this new century within a web of uncertainties. Critical literacy in a global perspective offers hope. Riley (2015) suggests that critical literacy is a set of evolving concepts that put in motion a set of attitudes. Freire and Macedo (2003) see critical literacy as a set of dialogues that empower consciousness. In many ways, it is an emancipatory action that helps students obtain a critical posture on the world around them (Freire, 1970). Critical literacy offers a form of transformation that reinvents the powers of production and the voices of knowledge. It offers a more purposeful and relevant approach to teaching and learning that fosters both the will and capacity to navigate global complexities in ways that promote and support decisions and actions that can positively transform the world (Janks, 2012).

Conclusion

In this new millennium, both literacy and social studies have taken on new meanings as educators attempt to prepare today's learners. There is a challenge to redefine views of what twenty-first-century students should learn, know, and be able to do with regard to both literacy and social studies in light of profound social and global challenges. Teachers are preparing to welcome new generations of students who do not know what it is like to live without cell phones, instant communication, and social media. Recent global events have forced us to look at the world differently. As a result, we no longer have the luxury of looking at events that occur on the other side of the world as distant affairs; rather, we must view them as important occurrences that can directly affect our own lives and communities. We are living in a time when distance is more invisible than ever as we travel more, move more often, and connect electronically with lightning speed to every corner of the world. As teachers, we must be mindful of what is at stake. From the Arab Spring to the turmoil of Ferguson, Missouri, to the tragedy of Trayvon Martin, social media were at the front and center of these events. These examples are just a few of the many realities that students today must face. In this article, the authors have explored different perspectives and approaches to literacy and social studies. Critical literacy moves beyond technical and functional knowledge and skills toward an approach to seeing and "reading" oneself and the world. Similarly, critical approaches to social studies transcend the mere

memorization of facts, names, places, and dates to emphasize inquiry and action. Uniting these approaches can promote and support critical thinking that fosters consideration of the complexities of current issues in an effort to make informed decisions and take actions that positively transform the world. Teachers, schools, and communities that engage critical literacy more explicitly in their teaching and learning of social studies will contribute richer learning experiences that enable students to better understand the past and present as well as shape the future.

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