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Keywords: Critical Literacy

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Abstract

This article traces the lineage of critical literacy from Freire through critical pedagogies and discourse analysis. The author discusses the need for a contingent definition of critical literacy, given the increasingly sophisticated nature of texts and discourses.

Keywords: Critical Literacy

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The new information order is messing with governments' and corporations' longstanding relations of control and domination. In the past year, the US State Department critiqued the Chinese government for their censorship of web engines, arguing that freedom of (*Google*) access to information was a democratic right. Yet several months later, the State Department declared the *Wikileaks* release of diplomatic cables a threat to national and geopolitical security. More recently, the new media have been used as a means for the dissent and revolution in the Middle East, with several governments attempting to shut down instant messaging and social networking, while maintaining longstanding control over traditional print and video reporting. The "global village" imagined by Marshall McLuhan (1968) is fact: a virtual and material world where traditional print and image, canonical genres and new modalities of information sit side by side – where new and old media build discourse communities and enable political and cultural action.

The current uprisings across this village return us to the classical questions of critical literacy. What is 'truth'? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts and discourses? For what purposes?

This isn't simply about reading or functional literacy. It never has been. *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Oryx and Crake* should be required reading for secondary English. They remind us that civil society, human relationships and freedom are dependent upon free flows of knowledge. These works teach the centrality of memory and history, the danger of autocratic control of information, and the moral imperative of critique. Struggles over power are indeed struggles over the control of information and interpretation. Wherever textual access, critique and interpretation are closed down, whether via corporate or state or religious control of the press, of the internet, of server-access, of the archive of knowledge – from the first libraries of Alexandria to *Google* – human agency, self-determination and freedom are put at risk.

These ultimately are curriculum questions: about whose version of culture, history and everyday life will count as official knowledge. They are questions about pedagogy and teaching: about which modes of information and cognitive scripts, which designs and genres shall be deemed worth learning, what kinds of tool use with reading and writing will be taught, for what social and cultural purposes and interests.

The term *literacy* refers to the reading and writing of text. The term *critical literacy* refers to 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 (Luke, 2004). Since Freire's (1970) educational projects in Brazil, approaches to critical literacy have been developed through feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist and critical race theory, critical linguistics and cultural studies, and indeed, rhetorical and cognitive models.

This is an introduction to models developed for schools. Critical literacy is a overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities. This involves both redistributive and recognitive social justice (Fraser, 1997): the more equitable distribution and achievement of literate practices, and; shifts in the ideological content and uses of literacy. Critical literacy has an explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, institutions and political systems. As a practical approach to curriculum, it melds social, political and cultural debate and discussion with the analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interests.

Different approaches reflect regional and local cultural and policy contexts. Over five decades, models have been developed in large-scale national literacy campaigns, informal and community education programs for women and migrants, adult and technical education, university literature and cultural studies, and teacher education. In schools, models of critical literacy have been applied in the fields of English, language arts, writing, TESOL, social studies education, media and information technologies (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005). The articles in this edition review many of these approaches.

Historical Foundations

The term “critical” has a distinctive etymology. It is derived from the Greek adjective *kriticos*, the ability to argue and judge. Working in marginalized indigenous and peasant communities in Brazil, Freire’s (1970) approach was grounded in Marxist and phenomenological philosophies. He argued that schooling was based on a “banking model” of education, where learners’ lives and cultures were taken as irrelevant. He advocated a dialogical approach to literacy based on principles of reciprocal exchange. These would critique and transform binary relationships of oppressed and oppressor, teacher and learner. “Cultural circles” would begin with dialogue on learners’ problems, struggles and aspirations. The focus would be on naming and renaming, narrating and understanding learners’ life worlds, with the aim of framing and solving real problems. Reading and writing are about substantive lives and material realities, and they are goal and problem-directed. “Reading the word”, then, entails “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), unpacking myths and distortions and building new ways of knowing and acting upon the world. Technical mastery of written language, then, is a *means* to broader human agency, individual and collective action – not an end in itself.

There are many antecedents to Freire’s approach. Early 20th century exemplars of working class and African-American community education were established in many cities (Shannon, 1988; Willis, 2008). There are significant European treatises on language and literature as potential modes of political and social

action. These range from Voloshinov's (1929/1986) analysis of "speech genres" as political acts, to Brecht's experiments with political drama (Weber & Heinen, 2010). Work in postwar British cultural studies by Richard Hoggart (1957) and Raymond Williams (1977) set the directions for approaches to critical literacy: (1) the expansion of education beyond canonical and literary texts to include works of popular culture; (2) a focus on critical analysis as *counter-hegemonic* critique that might, in turn, (3) encourage recognition of marginalised communities' histories and experiences.

Poststructuralist models of discourse are another philosophical influence. Versions of social and material 'reality' are built and shaped through linguistic categorization. Yet one of the principal unresolved issues in Freire's work was its dialectical technique of binary opposition (e.g., oppressor/oppressed, monologue and dialogue), and the absence of an elaborated model of text and language. A central tenet of Foucault's (1972) analysis of discourse was that binary opposition had the potential to obscure the complexity of discourse. Poststructuralist theory both critiqued the literary canon and argued against the validity of any definitive interpretation or 'truth' from a given text (Derrida, 1978).

Taken together, these diverse foundations have led to: (1) a focus on ideology critique and cultural analysis as a key element of education against cultural exclusion and marginalization; (2) a commitment to the inclusion of working class, cultural and linguistic minorities, indigenous learners, and others marginalised on the basis of gender, sexuality or other forms of difference; (3) an engagement with the significance of text, ideology and discourse in the construction of social and material relations, everyday cultural and political life.

Educational Antecedents

In the late 20th century, reading psychologists began to expand models of reading beyond behaviourism to emphasize meaning-construction (e.g., vanDijk & Kintsch, 1983). Hence, American reading research focused on "comprehension" and "higher order" skills, including prediction and inference. These versions of *critical reading* define literacy as an internal cognitive process reliant upon readers' background knowledge or "schemata" (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). There is a rationalist assumption at work here: that critique enables the identification of logical or factual error. The Enlightenment belief in the scientific falsification and verification of knowledge is central to definition of higher order thinking and, indeed, linguistic complexity and function (Halliday & Martin, 1995). Literacy is affiliated with the developmental acquisition of complex forms of reasoning and cognitive processes (e.g., taxonomy, categorization) and growth from narrative to expository genres (Olson, 1996).

In schools, critical reading is taught as a reasoned approach to identifying author bias; approaches to comprehension focus on the multiple possible meanings derived from the interaction of background knowledge and textual message. Yet there is little recognition that texts and curriculum necessarily engage particular

cultural and political standpoints. Nor is there emphasis on the ways that text selection and the shaping of what counts as ‘reading’ can serve cultural and social class-based interests (Luke, 1988).

Current models of critical reading also draw from postwar literary theory. Many 1960s university and secondary school English classrooms focused readers on the close reading of textual features and literary devices (e.g., Wellek & Warren, 1949). In US English education, the shift from New Criticism to reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) set the grounds for an increased emphasis on “personal response” to literature. The assumption was that literary texts produce diverse meanings, depending upon readers’ affective responses. In more general terms, literature becomes a means for the moral and intellectual construction of the self (Willinsky, 1990).

These models of literacy as cognitive process, as textual analysis, and as personal response feature in school curriculum. These do move beyond Freire’s typification of schooling as a banking model. Cognitive models invoke readers’ background knowledge, acknowledging the cultural basis of the resources children bring to school. Further, reader response models approaches share with Freire a focus on the possibilities of literacy for the critical analysis of self/other relations and the restoration of power to readers. These remain focal points in the development of cultural approaches to literacy (e.g., McNaughton, 2002) and in efforts to meld learner-centered models with social and political analysis (e.g., Edelsky, 1991).

Yet critical literacy approaches set the reshaping of political consciousness, material conditions and social relations as first principles. They also differ in their understandings of the relative agency and power of readers and writers, texts and language.

Critical Pedagogies

Freire’s principles have been formed into a broad project of “critical pedagogy” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Freire’s draws from Marx the key concept that ruling class ideology defines school knowledge and ideology. By this view, school literacy creates a *receptive* literacy, involving a passive reproduction of knowledge. The focus of critical literacy is on ideology critique of the world portrayed in media, literature, textbooks and functional texts (Shor & Freire, 1987). The alternative is to begin from learners’ worldviews, in effect turning them into inventors of the curriculum, critics and creators of knowledge.

Critical analyses of economic conditions were central to literacy campaigns led by Freire in Africa and the Americas (Kukendall, 2010), and they are the focus of current efforts at political education in the Americas (e.g., Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). Students are involved in analysis of the effects of capitalism, colonialism and inequitable economic relations. This entails working with learners to question class, race, gender relations through dialogic exchange. In such a setting traditional authority and epistemic knowledge relations of

teachers and student shift: learners become teachers of their understandings and experiences, and teachers become learners of these same contexts. This might entail setting open, dialogic conditions of exchange by establishing a cultural circle amongst adult learners. In school classrooms, it might entail establishing democratic conditions in classrooms where authentic exchange can occur around social and cultural issues (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008; Vasquez, 2003). In schools and universities, these approaches also focus literacy on community study, the analysis of social movements, service learning and political activism. They also involve the development of a critical “media literacy”, focusing on the analysis of popular cultural texts including advertising, news, broadcast media and the Internet (e.g., Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner, 2005). Finally, there is a broad focus in these models on alternative versions of history and science.

In the early 1990s, feminist scholars argued that the model risked ideological imposition that was contrary to its ethos. In everyday practice, there was, and is, a parallel risk of pedagogic imposition given the complex forms of gendered and raced voice and power, identity, and subjectivity at work in classroom interaction (Luke & Gore, 1991). The critiques have had a continuing impact. Especially in Australia and Canada, approaches to school reading focus on textual and media representations of women and girls (Morgan, 1997; Mellor, O’Neill & Patterson, 2000) and on gendered patterns of classroom interaction (Lee, 1996). Relatedly, there is a stronger focus on ‘standpoint’ and agency, including a critique of patriarchy in critical pedagogy.

American approaches to critical literacy have developed a strong focus on the *politics of voice*, on engaging with the histories, identities and struggles faced by groups marginalized on the basis of difference of gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation (e.g., Kumishiro & Ngo, 2007). A critical approach to language and literacy education requires an explicit engagement with cultural and linguistic diversity (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Kubota & Lin, 2009).

Discourse Analytic Approaches

Three decades of ethnographic research have documented the cultural, social, cognitive and linguistic complexity of literacy acquisition and use. This raises two substantive educational challenges for critical pedagogy approaches. First, it is largely synchronic, advocating particular approaches to literacy pedagogy without a broader developmental template. While Freirian models provide a pedagogical approach and a political stance, they lack specificity on how teachers and students can engage with the complex structures of texts, both traditional and multimodal. The acquisition of language, text and discourse requires the developmental engagement with levels of linguistic and discourse complexity and access to multiple discourses and affiliated linguistic registers (Gee, 1991; Lemke, 1996). Later models of critical literacy, particularly those developed in Australia and the UK, attempt to come to grips with these practical issues.

A major critique of critical pedagogy was that it overlooked the need for students to master a range of textual genres and registers, specialized ways with words

used in science, social institutions and further education (Halliday & Martin, 1995). Systemic functional linguists argue that the mastery of genre entails sophisticated lexical and grammatical choice (Hasan & Williams, 1996). Equitable access to how texts work, they argue, is an essential step in redistributive social justice, and cannot be achieved through a principal focus on student voice or ideology critique. The affiliated approach to critical literacy, then, argues for explicit instruction and direct access to “genres of power” (Kalantzis & Cope, 1996). Yet there are unresolved issues about the balance of direct access to canonical texts and registers, on the one hand, and ideology critique, on the other, is required.

An practical approach is based upon critical discourse analysis, an explicitly political derivative of systemic functional linguistics (Fairclough, 1990; Janks, 2010). Bringing together ideology critique with an explicit instructional focus on teaching how texts work, Fairclough (1990) argues for the teaching of “critical language awareness”. This entails teaching students the analysis of a range of texts – functional, academic, literary – attending to lexico-grammatical structure, ideological contents, and the identifiable conditions of production and use (Luke, 2001). Critical linguistics makes broad distinctions between ideological formations in texts, their social functions and their distinctive features, and the social fields where they have exchange value. This enables teachers and students to focus on how words, grammar and discourse choices shape a version of material, natural and sociopolitical worlds. It also enables a focus on how words and grammar attempt to establish relations of power between authors and readers, speakers and addressees. Furthermore, it enables a critical engagement with the question of where texts are used, by whom, and in whose interests.

Critical literacy – by this account – entails the developmental engagement by learners with the major texts, discourses and modes of information. It attempts to attend to the ideological and hegemonic functions of texts, as in critical pedagogy models. But it augments this by providing students with technical resources for analyzing how texts work (Wallace, 2003). For example, this might entail the analysis of a textbook or media representation of political or economic life. But in addition to questions of how a text might reflect learners’ life worlds and experiences, it also teaches them how the selection of specific grammatical structures and word choices attempts to manipulate the reader.

What is to be Done?

Critical literacy approaches view language, texts and their discourse structures as principle means for representing and reshaping possible worlds. The aim is the development of human capacity to use texts to analyse social fields and their systems of exchange – with an eye to transforming social relations and material conditions. As a cultural and linguistic practice, then, critical literacy entails an understanding of how texts and discourses can be manipulated to represent and, indeed, *alter* the world. But this focus on ‘power’, on ‘transformation’ and change does not and cannot in itself resolve central issues around moral and political

normativity (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1998; Pennycook, 2001): around the question of whose values, texts, ideologies and discourses should take centre stage, and about the desired shapes and directions of social transformation.

Freire's initial model was a significant statement in point-of-decolonisation educational theory. That is, the silencing of urban and rural classes set the grounds for an explicitly political educational agenda. Yet while the Freirian model was based on binary analyses of "oppressed" and "oppressors" - globalised "hypercapiatalist" systems (Graham, 2006) have led to more complex economic and political forces, with the emergence of multiple forms of solidarity and identity, new political coalitions and social movements.

New media have created dynamic and enabling conditions for new cultures, social movements and politics (Hammer & Kellner, 2009). Definitions of literacy have expanded to include engagement with texts in a range of semiotic forms: visual, aural, and digital multimodal texts (e.g. Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008). As my initial comments on the current political contexts in the Middle East suggest – this isn't just a matter of 'designer' careers and new technologies, as stated in curriculum policy. It is about the possibility of using new literacies to change relations of power, both peoples' everyday social relations, and larger geopolitical and economic relations. At the same time, digital engagement in itself does not constitute a critical literacy approach, for digital culture sits within a complex, emergent political economic order that, for many learners and adults, is well beyond comprehension and critique. Who understands structures of debt? The trasnational division of labor and wealth? Derivatives and futures markets? This will require a new vocabulary to describe, analyze and, indeed, critique current economic structures and forces (Luke, Luke & Graham, 2008).

Critical literacies are, by definition, historical works in progress. There is no 'correct' or universal model. Critical literacy entails a process of naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs and complexities, and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it (New London Group, 1996). How educators shape and deploy the tools, attitudes and philosophies of critical literacy is utterly contingent: it depends upon students' and teachers' everyday relations of power, their lived problems and struggles, and, as the articles here demonstrate, on educators' professional ingenuity in navigating the enabling and disabling local contexts of policy.

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