

Reading “the Word and the World”: The Double-Edged Sword of Teaching Critical Literacy

Virtually anyone who has recently gone through a teacher education program or an inservice training has heard the term *critical literacy*, possibly ad nauseum. The very term has become a buzzword throughout literacy circles. It is a concept that has become so central to literacy instruction that teachers are, in addition to teaching students the basics of reading and writing, also supposed to foster in their students higher-level thinking and notions of social justice.

Though much has been said about the importance of critical literacy, relatively little has been said about *what* it actually is, *how* to teach it, or *what to do* with the problems inherent in teaching it. Certainly there is little doubt that having the ability to read critically is empowering to students; it provides them with the tools they need to more fully “read their world” (Macedo & Freire, 1987) and become more active participants within it (Gee, 1990). But with such student empowerment come any number of potentially serious issues that, so far, have gone largely unexamined.

Literacy specialists have long pointed out that students need to develop critical thinking skills in order to function fully in the world. Without a deeper reflection and critical analysis of the issues about which students are learning, these future players on our national stage are likely to repeat the same mistakes as their prede-

cessors. Critical literacy theorists, however, take this belief one radical step further. They call for social action based upon the deeper understanding one receives through critical reading and thinking: “Critical literacy is a vehicle through which educators teach for social justice. [It] interrogates texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions, and the power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices” (Wallowitz, 2008, pp. 1–2). Thus, critical literacy theorists hold that critical literacy is by definition transformative while traditional literacy—*sans* the addition of critical literacy—is nothing short of hegemonic (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1993; Wallowitz, 2008). Without critical literacy, students will, in essence, never break out of dominant paradigms (Kuhn, 1962/1996); instead, they will become unwitting agents of the status quo with all of its faults and injustices (Carlson & Apple, 1998; Freire, 1970).

A critical literacy stance holds that it is the teacher’s job to both teach students basic literacy skills and help them build critical literacy so that literacy itself serves the purpose of helping to create a more just world. However, the teaching of critical literacy is not only very difficult and very controversial, it may lead to unintended and possibly counterproductive consequences. The true critical literacy educator must therefore take a critical approach to the teaching of critical literacy itself. In doing so, he or she finds that critical literacy is inherently a double-edged sword that can cut in many directions.

The first cut: merely asking teachers to foster critical literacy in their students is too often

akin to asking the blind to lead the blind. In my language arts methods classes, for example, I am repeatedly reminded that these future teachers have little grasp of what it means to read critically. Far too few of them experienced critical literacy instruction in their K–12 or college experiences. Rather, many of their courses have only reinforced the idea of reading and teaching solely for comprehension. The use of detailed rubrics, step-by-step lesson plans, and predetermined measures of student knowledge and ability—in essence, telling students specifically what they need to know—have also served to deemphasize critical literacy.

Complicating the problem is the fact that critical literacy is seldom exemplified outside of the academy. Even a superficial analysis of the major media outlets of our own country—sources that are by definition supposed to be critical—reveals that they present “news” as facts and themselves as unbiased. We must therefore question how teachers are supposed to learn to use and teach critical literacy when there are so few good examples of it? Such an important question begs another (if not many more): Might teaching a flawed understanding of critical literacy do more harm than good?

The second cut: While teachers today are being asked to teach critical literacy, they are not told *how* to do so. Instead, they are increasingly required to adhere to scripted curricula, pacing guides, and norm-referenced assessments, all of which are anathemas to critical literacy. Although curriculum and textbook publishers claim that their materials promote critical thinking (note that they seldom claim to promote *critical literacy*, however), large-scale and packaged curricula dictate both how and what teachers can teach and what students can learn. For example, the questions asked within curriculum guides promote specific kinds of responses, thereby limiting students’ ability to think “outside of the box” (McGinley, Conley, & White, 2000). Thus, to teach true critical literacy, teachers must have ample time, a sympathetic administration, and the resources to work outside of such curricula.

The third cut (is the deepest): The teaching of critical literacy is itself a political endeavor; we are asking students not only to question the texts that we as a society hold dear, but also to use them as catalysts to promote social change. Critical literacy encourages students to interrogate the very texts we use to teach them and the manner through which we do so. Ironically, if we are successful in teaching critical literacy to students, we may also be teaching them to critique—and to try to change—the materials, pedagogy, and school structure we are using to educate them. Complicating matters further is the fact that critical literacy also encourages students to critique the tenets by which their own parents live and their cultures operate. Critical literacy’s radical nature tends to prove objectionable to those whose beliefs and lifestyles are being challenged. Thus, when imagining a school full of students who have been taught critical literacy, one must also envision the possible results: students dissatisfied with the very society, schools, and culture(s) we are preparing them to join and parents dissatisfied with us. Paradoxically, when charged with teaching students critical literacy, teachers should be wary of actually succeeding in the endeavor!

None of this is meant to discourage teachers from teaching critical literacy. Rather, it is meant to show that the buzzword is itself loaded and often misunderstood. If we are to teach critical literacy to our students, we must come to this noble endeavor critically. In this sense, we must use the lens of critical literacy to examine critical literacy itself, and we must, as always, be open to yet another paradox in the teaching of the language arts.

References

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