Myths about Critical Literacy: What Teachers Need to Unlearn

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By discussing commonly held myths, this paper attempts to clarify a number of important issues in the area of critical literacy education. These include the distinction between critical thinking and critical literacy, the audience critical literacy is meant for, the philosophical underpinnings of critical literacy, and the relationship between critical literacy on the one hand and reading and writing on the other hand. This paper urges literacy educators to examine their beliefs critically and unlearn ungrounded misconceptions about critical literacy. It is imperative that literacy educators have a better understanding of critical literacy before it can take root in the classrooms.

Keywords: critical literacy/pedagogy, literacy education, teacher education, Paulo Freire

Introduction

Critical literacy is not a new term among scholars and researchers in literacy education. Actually, it has been around for decades. Paulo Freire is probably one of the names that will pop up immediately the moment critical literacy is mentioned. Freire's (1984) pedagogy of the oppressed, the "prototype" of critical literacy, consists of two stages:

> In the first stage, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. (p. 40)

Aligned with Freire's pedagogy, critical literacy is intended to help the marginalized unveil unequal power relations and transform their lives through the empowerment of literacy education. Critical literacy argues that being critically literate is acquiring knowledge of literacy that can be turned into action to change the status quo. Knowledge in this sense, according to Giroux and Giroux (2004), "is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-determination, individual autonomy, and social agency" (p. 84). Freire's thought and work have spread beyond Brazil, his native country, and have made a profound impact in literacy education and other disciplines as well. For example, the scholastic lineage of many of the works in critical literacy (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; McLaren, 1995) can be linked to Freire. Freire's pedagogy is not only enlightening at the theoretical level, but it is also applicable in practice.

While critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, it does not seem to take root in the classrooms. As a literacy teacher educator, I have worked with a few schools in placing pre-service teachers for their field experiences in the past few years. The majority of the pre-service teachers in our teacher education program are Caucasian. Most of them grew up and were educated in an environment where people of color were hardly encountered. However, two of the school districts in which they are placed for their field experiences or are likely to be employed in the future have very diverse student populations. Because critical literacy is concerned primarily with empowering the marginalized, I believe it will come in handy for the pre-service teachers, especially for those who are going to work in the nearby urban school districts. As a result, I do see the need of incorporating critical literacy into the literacy courses I teach in the teacher education program. For example, the pre-service teachers in the elementary program are required by one of my courses entitled Methods of Teaching Language Arts to design and implement a curricular unit, called an invitation (more on this later), aligned with critical literacy during their internship. However, the pre-service teachers usually receive little support from their supervising teachers, i.e., the classroom teachers with whom the pre-service teachers do their internship, due to the latter's limited understanding of the nature of critical literacy.

Similarly, the in-service teachers in our Master's program do not recall taking courses related to critical literacy in their undergraduate or graduate programs. Nor do they see such practices in their school buildings. Last year, I was invited to do a brief presentation on literacy education to

a principal advisory board which consisted of thirteen elementary and secondary principals. I began the presentation by asking, "How many of you have heard about critical literacy?" Not surprisingly, only a couple of them raised their hands. Yet upon further inquiry, they appeared to have difficulty explaining what critical literacy was about.

Consequently, this paper attempts to clarify a number of important issues in the area of critical literacy by discussing commonly held myths or misconceptions I have observed or heard among the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom I have worked in the past few years. Each myth presented in this paper is followed by a discussion of related research on critical literacy and its implications. It is imperative that literacy educators understand what critical literacy is before they can make the best use of it in their classrooms.

Myth 1: Critical Literacy Is Critical Thinking

Critical literacy is often believed to be critical thinking or higher order thinking, a concept based on learning taxonomies such as Bloom's (1984) taxonomy. The idea is that some types of learning require more cognitive processing than others. In Bloom's taxonomy, for example, skills involving analysis, evaluation, and synthesis are thought to be of a higher order, requiring different learning and teaching methods, than the learning of facts and concepts. Higher order thinking involves the learning of complex judgmental skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

Though critical thinking is related to critical literacy, the former defined, for example, in Bloom's taxonomy is inadequate in presenting an overall picture of the latter. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) argue that

> Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice…. These practices are substantively different from what are commonly referred to as critical thinking approaches. Although critical thinking approaches have focused more on logic and comprehension, critical literacies have focused on identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place. (p. 3)

Consequently, critical literacy practices differ from critical thinking skills in that the former are set in a sociopolitical context oriented toward identifying unequal power relationships and serving social justice. In illustration, to understand an article on sports, we need to find the thesis of the article and evaluate whether the evidence used by the author to support the thesis is convincing. However, this kind of understanding is concerned more with critical thinking, which focuses on whether the article is logically organized and the argument is well supported. Critical literacy takes a step further to question or problematize, for example, gender biases embedded in the article and investigate them from multiple perspectives. By uncovering such biases that are situated in a sociopolitical context, we become critically informed and can even take actions against them. Therefore, while critical thinking and critical literacy overlap in certain aspects, the latter should not be reduced to the former.

Myth 2: Critical Literacy Is Meant for High Ability Students

A related myth concerns the audience for critical literacy. Most of the teachers with whom I have worked believe that critical literacy is geared to high ability students. They do not think that the so-called "at-risk" students or lower elementary school students are capable of engaging in critical literacy practices. For example, I mentioned previously that the pre-service teachers in my Methods of Teaching Language Arts course are required to design and implement a curricular unit, called an invitation or a critical invitation, in line with critical literacy during their internship. A critical invitation starts off of students' interests, provides choices, and helps students situate an issue in a sociopolitical context and investigate it critically (see Van Sluys, 2005 for more details on invitations). After the pre-service teachers explain to their supervising teachers about what they are supposed to do, the supervising teachers usually suggest that they work with the top students in their class. Following is a quotation from the report written by one of the pre-service teachers after he implemented the invitation:

> First, my cooperating teacher and I discussed what students I would enjoy doing this with the most. I turned the question back on her and asked what students this would benefit the most. After explaining to her what a critical invitation was, she decided that her high ability students would be most suitable for this invitation. Besides, she stressed that her struggling students might be turned off to such an assignment because they are still focusing on learning how to do minimal grade level work, such as reading and writing.

Similarly, here is another example of how students were picked for an invitation implemented by another pre-service teacher:

> In this particular class, there are twenty-nine students; however, I only chose to do my invitation with high ability students…. The four students that ended up working on this invitation were picked by the teacher and myself based on grades, attitude, work ethic, etc. I was very pleased when I got them together for our first meeting to introduce the invitation.

The misconception that critical literacy is meant for high ability students is actually tied closely to the first myth that critical literacy is critical thinking or higher order thinking. Specifically, if critical literacy is believed, or misbelieved, to be higher order thinking, it seems reasonable that high ability students are better at more advanced cognitive skills.

Nevertheless, critical literacy is intended originally to empower the marginalized through literacy education. Specifically, Freire spent time with working-class peasants, learning the words that were meaningful to them, words that evoked responses in them. These he called "generative words" (Freire, 1984, p. 101). He wanted the peasants to feel that they had power over their words and could exercise power over them. Research has also shown that critical literacy can be implemented with young students and English language learners (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Sahni, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Van Sluys, 2005; Vasquez, 2001; Wallace, 2001). Kim Huber, for instance, documents how she helped her first-grade students explore critical picture books and take actions to change the community around them (Leland & Huber, 2008). Huber's school participated in a food drive for a local

food pantry, and her students were reminded each morning and right before going home for the day to bring in more food items. There was even a contest set up to see which class could bring in the most items. To help her students understand the meaning of a food drive, Huber decided to read a critical picture book, *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997), to her students. The next day, "the children came in loaded down with more items. No one made a comment about winning, but instead they talked of how the food would be used by people who did not have enough to eat" (Leland & Huber, 2008, p. 62). Therefore, critical literacy is meant not simply for high ability students but also for all students, including young students and English language learners.

Myth 3: Critical Literacy Is an Instructional Strategy

For many teachers, critical literacy is merely an instructional strategy that is often embodied in the format of a center, station, or lesson. For example, after consulting with their supervising teachers, the pre-service teachers in my Methods of Teaching Language Arts course are usually given a center or station to implement their invitations during their internship. Some of them are even given a restricted time period to finish their projects. One of the pre-service teachers described how her invitation was carried out at stations:

> Stations were broken into groups of two to three students and took up 40 to 60 minutes per day. After a certain amount of time, usually 20 to 30 minutes, all students were asked to clean up their stations and the teacher moved each group to another station. Therefore, two groups of students would visit the writing station per day, which meant I would work with two groups for my invitation per day. It took me a week to get to all students.

It is understandable that most classroom teachers are pressed for time and that helping the pre-service teachers with their assignment like the invitation can be another burden on their already busy schedule. Yet how the classroom teachers suggest that the invitation should be implemented also implies their inadequate understanding of critical literacy. Below is another example where the classroom teacher tried to dovetail the pre-service teacher's invitation into her own agenda regardless of the fact that the invitation was reduced simply to a subset of her own lesson plan.

> I talked with the teacher about the invitation, and I initially suggested I might focus on friendship because almost everybody is interested in friendship. The teacher seemed to be pushing magnets. I agreed that magnets might be something interesting for the curious students to discover, and since this was not my classroom, I decided I would develop a critical invitation that focused on magnets. I did not mind her persuasion since I was having trouble developing a topic anyway. I later realized that the teacher had a science lesson coming up that focused on magnets, and I realized her suggestion was likely an opportunity for her to allow me to conduct at least a portion of the invitation while keeping up with covering all the required state standards.

If critical literacy is not merely an instructional strategy or a lesson plan, then what is it? Freire believes that critical literacy is to read both the word and the world critically, that is, to transform the world through literacy education (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For Freire, the world in which we

live is subject not only to natural evolution but to an historical evolution in which human beings have a guiding hand. Thus, the role of critical literacy education is to empower human beings as able agents to pursue humanization which is constantly "thwarted by injustice, exploration, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors" (Freire, 1984, p. 28). This is why Michael Crotty (2003) says that Freire's pedagogy "is no mere pedagogical technique. It intimately reflects Freire's philosophy of existence…" (p. 148). In this sense, critical literacy is not an instructional strategy but a philosophical belief embodied in literacy education that "students are language users, not language recipients," and they learn through language to co-construct their worlds with others (Van Sluys, 2005, p. 2).

Myth 4: Critical Literacy Is Only about Reading and Writing

If asked what it is to be literate, most people will say reading and writing. Undeniably, reading and writing are the most used literacy skills or language arts in our society. They are not only used in our daily communication but also tested in schools. As a result, they are foregrounded and privileged against other literacy skills such as speaking, writing, viewing, and visually representing. In fact, this myopic view on literacy is reflected in the titles of literacy courses we offer at the college level. Education courses such as Methods of Teaching Language Arts are supposed to be a comprehensive survey of multiple language arts and their pedagogical methods. Yet such courses usually focus narrowly on reading and writing. In fact, most of the literacy courses in education place a considerable emphasis on these two literacy skills. This lopsided emphasis also leads to the misconception that critical literacy is only about reading and writing.

Harste (2003) suggests that two of the most recent insights about literacy are "multiple literacies" and "literacy as social practice" (p. 8). Instead of one literacy, there are multiple literacies that include art, music, movement, visual text literacies, etc. Similarly, instead of thinking about literacy as skills to master, thinking about literacy as social practice is already revolutionary. These two insights, Harste (2003) goes on to argue, lead to an important implication that literacy becomes:

> A particular set of social practices that a particular set of people value. In order to change anyone's definition of literacy, the social practices that keep a particular (and often older) definition of literacy in place have to change. (p. 8)

Literacy viewed from this expanded perspective is no longer concerned simply with isolated skills but deals with diverse social practices that have an enormous impact on our understanding of literacy. Harste's view is actually consistent with Freire's proposition that we interact with and transform the world through literacy education. It also foregrounds the importance of situating literacy education in a sociopolitical context in that as no social practices are neutral, neither are literacy practices. Literacy should be examined critically to see how it is used to position us. Critical literacy, in this sense, is not limited to the mastery of reading and writing.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Research on critical literacy has shown that there are many misconceptions about critical literacy. Teachers need to be aware of these research findings and to unlearn unfounded ways of thinking. Critical literacy is broader in scope and meant for a larger audience than most teachers have been led to believe. We need consciously to rethink what our beliefs are and whether they

are well grounded. I would like to challenge literacy educators to join, and invite their students to participate in, the critical literacy club. Critical literacy is not a pedagogical technique to be learned but our ontological existence, i.e., part of our lives. It is something we do everyday to be informed agents in relation to others in a society where knowledge is socially constructed. We evaluate the texts in multiple forms critically to make our everyday decisions in various settings. Therefore, if critical literacy is what we encounter daily as human beings, it is important that it should become part of our education. Freire (1984) says it well that critical literacy without action is simply verbalism. Similarly, no matter how long and how well it has been researched, critical literacy without taking root in our classrooms is still a theory.

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