CRITICAL LITERACY FOR DEMOCRATIC LEARNING IN CAREER EDUCATION

Emery J. Hyslop-Margison
Concordia University

Laura Pinto
University of Toronto

In this article, we explore the models of literacy conveyed by contemporary secondary career education policies, programs, and imperatives in the province of Ontario. The Ontario career education policies we reviewed uniformly advance a functional and socially reproductive model of literacy that undermines the democratic agency of learners. In response to these concerns, we propose that critical literacy should be introduced into Ontario secondary career education initiatives to encourage the democratic participation of students in shaping their vocational experience.

Key words: false generosity, critical literacy, democratic learning

Dans cet article, les auteurs analysent les modèles de littératie qui ressortent des politiques, programmes et impératifs actuels en matière de formation au choix d'une carrière au secondaire en Ontario. Les politiques ontariennes que les auteurs ont étudiées prônent toutes un modèle de littératie fonctionnel qui privilégie la reproduction sociale, modèle qui entrave l'action démocratique des apprenants. Tenant compte de cette préoccupation, les auteurs proposent l'introduction de la littératie critique dans les initiatives en matière de formation au choix de carrière en vue d'encourager les élèves à participer démocratiquement à leur orientation professionnelle.

Mots clés : fausse générosité, littératie critique, apprentissage démocratique

---

Different assumptions support the conceptions of literacy found in a range of contemporary education policy initiatives. These assumptions, and the models of literacy they support, emerge from distinct political perspectives on the role of students within society and on the general purpose of public schooling. On one hand, literacy provides students with functional skills to apply in a predetermined social context, while, on the other, literacy strengthens the critical understanding necessary for participatory democratic citizenship. These contrasting models of literacy reflect different ways of viewing education, and disparate ideas about the role of students, workers, and citizens in shaping their social and vocational experience. Conceptual disputes over literacy are surface manifestations of underlying political differences that strike to the core of debates about appropriate educational aims and the democratic construction of society.

In this article, we explore the models of literacy reflected in contemporary Ontario secondary career education policies, programs, and imperatives. These policies and programs are by no means unique in current Canadian curriculum development, but they afford one example of a socially reproductive model of learning that potentially undermines the democratic agency of learners. We also argue that the current emphasis on enhancing literacy skills in Ontario's career education initiatives contradicts current labour market trends indicating job growth is centered in occupations requiring minimal levels of literacy. Nevertheless, the focus on literacy skills serves an ideological purpose by distracting educators and other stakeholders from addressing the labour market injustices caused by neo-liberal capitalism. In response to these concerns, we conclude that critical literacy should be introduced into career education initiatives to encourage the democratic participation of students in shaping their vocational experiences. We pose these questions: How is literacy portrayed within the career education components of Ontario secondary curricula? How might an understanding of these components be used to strengthen and respect the principles of democratic learning?

Recent empirical research indicates that curriculum design significantly influences the future political participation of students (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo, 1999). Formal policy design, then,

will to some extent determine whether career education is democratic or indoctrinatory in format and correspondingly influence the civic preparation of students. As a research method, policy analysis typically evaluates the merits, values, or worth of educational programs based on a set of stated assumptions and supplies important data about the benefits and problems of the programs under investigation. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) point out that policy analysts often use their findings to prepare position papers or reports for dissemination among those with decision-making authority. Policy analysis evaluates policies and programs to provide policy-makers and stakeholders with recommendations aimed at subsequent educational reform. The importance of policy analysis as a form of educational research is demonstrated in part "by the fact that in 1979 the American Education Research Association initiated a journal called Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis" (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p. 681).

One central identifying feature of policy analysis as a research method is the explicit incorporation of values or normative assumptions – in this case democratic learning principles – into its analytical framework. Policy analyses generally include four stages of research: a) determining the conceptual lens used to evaluate the policies and programs under review (in this case the principles of democratic learning); b) identifying the policies and programs to include in the analysis; c) analyzing the policies and programs through the conceptual lens; and d) recommending policy and program reforms to various stakeholders, especially those decisionmakers who have a direct impact on policy formation (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

Although in this article we focus on Ontario secondary career education initiatives related to literacy, the concerns we raise are applicable to other jurisdictions. The documents selected for analysis are either Ontario secondary career education programs or provincial curricula that contain various career preparatory imperatives. Our conceptual framework, or analytical lens, adopts the principles for democratic learning (PDL) established by Hyslop-Margison and Graham (2001):

a) Career education [literacy] instruction based on PDL respects student rationality, that is, the capacity of students to critique curriculum content.

When students are deprived the opportunity to question what they are learning, they become the passive objects of education rather than participatory subjects in learning.

b) Career education [literacy] programs based on PDL provide students with alternative viewpoints and perspectives on issues relevant to vocational experience. If students are expected to make informed, critical, democratic choices, they require some exposure to different perspectives on occupationally related matters.

c) Career education [literacy] instruction based on PDL does not depict social reality as fixed or predetermined, but explicitly recognizes the legitimate right of students to transform economic, labour market and working conditions through informed political participation. (Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2001, p. 342)

The PDL described above are designed to promote student understanding that society is a dynamic and transformable construct rather than a static and inexorable one.

THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CAREER EDUCATION: LITERACY AS A NECESSARY GOOD

Large-scale education reforms over the past decade in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom are characterized by a "back to basics" philosophy that emphasizes the need to improve the literacy skills of students (Levin, 1998). The education programs connected to these reforms overwhelmingly advance a functional conception of literacy designed to prepare students for the labour market challenges consistent with neo-liberal economics. Clearly, the ability to read, write, and comprehend text is, at least on one level, practically beneficial to students. With enhanced levels of literacy, individuals are better able to satisfy their basic daily needs such as earning an income, reading newspapers or magazines, purchasing goods and services, or commuting on public transportation. Functionally literate individuals are able to complete employment and loan applications, read schedules, and follow the directives of employers. On the face of it, then, functional literacy appears a practically beneficial capacity that inevitably enhances the quality of life for learners.

Functional literacy instruction assumes that an effective education

prepares students to satisfy the economic, social, and vocational requirements of some preordained context. In the Ontario secondary English Curriculum, for example, literacy is primarily defined as acquiring the reading, writing, and communication skills necessary for employment in the contemporary labour market:

> To participate fully in the society and workplace of the twenty-first century, today's students will need to be able to use language skillfully, confidently, and flexibly. Students need literacy skills to enable them to receive and comprehend ideas and information, to inquire further into areas of interest and study, to express themselves clearly, and to demonstrate their learning. (Ministry of Education, 2005a, n.p.)

Rather than critiquing the textual information they encounter as required by PDL, learners within this context are expected to adopt a more passive role by simply "receiving and comprehending ideas and information." Hence, the role of learners becomes a politically compliant or passive one where they assimilate the textual messages provided by some external source or authority.

The broad appeal of functional literacy is its ability to promote higher levels of student participation within the parameters of an existing social framework. Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) explain the seemingly innocuous rationale supporting the functional literacy approach: "The possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing" (p. 77). However, from an ideological perspective functional literacy also insulates the social structure from critique by naturalizing the established social, economic, and political context. For example, there is no suggestion in the Ontario English curriculum that students challenge the assumptions supporting the ideas they "receive and comprehend" or any recognition that learners possess the agency and democratic capacity to transform those assumptions. When text is presented to students in this fashion it implies that the world is inevitably shaped by the ideas and actions of others. The ideological implications of functional literacy, then, convey a socially reproductive political perspective to students about the relationship between citizens and the construction of social

reality, and between workers, employers, and potential labour market change.

CRITICAL LITERACY AS DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

Rather than viewing text simply as a means to enhance participation within the pre-existing social and economic order, critical literacy provides students with a vehicle for existential and social transformation. Proponents of critical literacy reject functional conceptions of literacy that promote the idea of student adaptation to prevailing economic and labour market conditions because such practices objectify students as compliant followers of global capitalism. As Lankshear (1993) observes, functional literacy portrays students as human capital being prepared for resource exploitation in the contemporary global marketplace.

> Functional literacy reduces persons to the status of mere objects and means, rather than confirming and exalting them as ends in themselves. It aims to equip illiterate [learners] with just those skills and knowledge – no more – which ensure competence to function at the lowest levels of mechanical performance, as workers and citizens in a print dominated society. (p. 91)

The failure to recognize literacy as a potentially indoctrinatory and politically disempowering force in education neglects the growing understanding that literacy is a principal tool of ideological manipulation. McLaren and Lankshear (1993) point out, for example, that

> Educators have become increasingly aware that, far from being a sure means to attain an accurate and deep understanding of the world and one's place within it, the ability to read and write may expose individuals and entire social groups to forms of domination and control by which their interests are subverted. (p. 386)

Although Luce-Kapler (2004) avoids the term critical literacy because it "has several meanings and each of those meanings carries a certain weight of history" (p. 159), she supports efforts to denaturalize text by making manifest the underlying assumptions it entails. She employs the term "critical awareness" to describe the analysis of text where narratives are "opened up, questioned, read closely, or even dismantled into lists of words" (p. 159). Another exercise Luce-Kapler proposes to

reveal underlying textual assumptions is encouraging students to re-write fairy tales from a feminist perspective to deconstruct the fallacious but socially instantiated idea of males as the protectors and saviours of women. These types of strategies foster what Shor (1992) describes as "critical consciousness," a critical literacy objective that allows students to debunk the functionalist assumption that "rejects human agency, denying that people can transform their conditions" (p. 126).

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) condemns functional literacy instruction as false generosity because it fails to alleviate the actual structural causes of illiteracy, and the economic and social suffering disadvantaged workers experience. He argues that functional literacy actually harmonizes the interests of the ruling elites and further undermines the disadvantaged by driving them into deeper cycles of economic dependency. False generosity occurs in functional literacy education when paternalistic forms of learning are bestowed on students to ameliorate slightly the effects of systemic social and economic hardship.

> A model case of false generosity is where well-to-do people make their services available to unemployed or poorly paid workers to teach the latter how to budget their inadequate finances. The presumption is that the problem of poverty lies within the individual – in the low or underpaid worker – and not in the economic structure. (Freire, 1970, p. 58)

The contemporary career education emphasis on functional literacy is an example of false generosity because it conveys to students that their vocational experience is entirely a product of individual competencies or skills, rather than the result of neo-liberal policies, labour market conditions, and the social structure of opportunity. As we illustrate in the ensuing section, Ontario's literacy policy in career education violates PDL and qualifies as false generosity because it implicitly advocates unquestioned student adaptation to existing structural conditions instead of encouraging their democratic participation in reshaping the economic and labour market milieu.

LITERACY CONSTRUCTS IN ONTARIO CAREER EDUCATION: ANALYSIS RESULTS

The 1998 Ontario Secondary Schools Detailed Discussion Document

issued by the Ministry of Education explored several possible purposes for education that eventually precipitated large-scale curricular reform in the province. These purposes range from preparing students for the workforce to preparing students as reflective individuals and engaged democratic citizens. The Ontario Ministry of Education concluded that meeting both of these objectives required enhancing the literacy skills of students. In a ministry brochure titled *Literacy in Ontario: The Rewards are for Life* (Ministry of Education, n.d.), and in contradiction to the democratic literacy goals identified above, the functionalist assumptions supporting the ministry's vision of literacy are revealed: "Literacy skills are needed every day – at work, at home, at school, in the community. These skills help people to take part in further education and training, as well as to find and keep jobs" (n.d., p. 2). The emphasis on simply encoding textual messages for instrumental workplace application without considering the broader social context from which that information emerges undermines the democratic participation of learners and PDL by ignoring their role as rational agents in social construction.

When learners are denied the opportunity to question the assumptions and implications of text, they are domesticated into the worldview of those providing the information. As a result, career education students exposed to this form of literacy are indoctrinated into accepting economic, labour market, and workplace conditions that may actually undermine their future vocational interests and opportunities. Rather than encouraging students to dialectically engage and transform the world of work, functional literacy imperatives simply expect them to satisfy externally generated directives and expectations deemed necessary for employment In functional literacy instruction, "There is no suggestion of leading, mastering or controlling" (Lanshear, 1993, p. 103). Students subjected to this approach are potentially estranged from the social policy decisions and political participation that might actually enrich their future vocational experiences by improving the difficult labour market conditions they currently confront.

Ontario's secondary school curriculum policy places a significant emphasis on career education throughout many different subject areas. A policy document titled *Choices into Action: Guidance and Career*

Education Program Policy for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education, 1999) was introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1998. This policy document describes "the purpose and importance of Ontario's guidance and career education program, its content, and its unique approach to teaching and learning" (p. 3) for students in grades one through twelve. No similar document existed in the previous curriculum policy, providing further evidence of increased emphasis on career education across all subject areas. Career education exists as a discreet (and compulsory) course, but more importantly is prominently woven into the curricula for other subject areas. In addition, each student must successfully complete a compulsory course, Career Studies, Grade 10, Open (GLC2O), to graduate. Although the subheadings vary slightly from subject to subject, each discipline's curriculum policy (e.g., math, English, humanities) contains a subsection titled "Career Education" that describes how that subject should be linked to occupational preparation. For example, The Ontario Curriculum for social sciences and humanities (Ministry of Education, 2000) states that: "The courses in the social sciences and humanities program help prepare students for the world of work, in that they include expectations related to career exploration and employability skills" (p. 141). The majority of the career-focused objectives require students to identify specific skills gained from the course that prepare them for particular occupations.

In some cases, students are expected to investigate employment trends, create portfolios, write resumes or letters of application, or prepare for job interviews. Such functional literacy practices may prepare students to meet the expectations of private industry, but they do not prepare them to become political agents of democratic change. For example, *The Ontario Curriculum, English, Grades 9 and 10* (Ministry of Education, 2005a) suggests, "Regardless of their postsecondary destination, all students need to realize that literacy skills are employability skills. Powerful literacy skills will equip students to manage information technologies, communicate effectively and correctly in a variety of situations, and perform a variety of tasks" (n.p.). Once again, students learn through implication that the important social decisions are made by others, and their role is following prescribed

instructions or meeting contemporary employment demands. In a context that describes "literacy skills as employability skills," communicating effectively and correctly means performing uncritical speech acts that promote the economic objectives of others.

Another problem with the constant connection drawn between curricula and workforce preparation in the Ontario curriculum documents we explored is the tacit suggestion that literacy is most valuable when related directly to employment. Even in Art Education, a subject where a reasonable effort ought to be made to promote the aesthetic sense of students as an end in itself, and an essential element in intellectual and emotional development, the primary focus is placed instead on practical job applications of learning outcomes: "Students can be encouraged to explore careers as artists, technicians, or arts administrators" (Ministry of Education, 2005c, n.p.). Although a limited number of art students may eventually find employment in one or more of these areas, linking disciplines such as the arts to career learning devalues the non-vocational aspects of a balanced and democratic learning experience. The constant linkages throughout the secondary Ontario curriculum between language and work undermine the importance of other literacy related aims such as fostering democratic political participation, promoting self-actualization, and strengthening social understanding. Instead, the Ontario documents offer narrow conceptions of literacy that are framed by the labour market expectations and employability skill requirements of neo-liberal ideology.

To support the literacy emphasis, *Think Literacy: Cross Curricular Approaches Grades 7-12* (TLCCA) (Ministry of Education, 2003) was introduced into all Ontario secondary schools in 2003. An aggressive dissemination strategy ensured that the document reached teachers who were strongly encouraged to utilize its proposed learning strategies. TLCCA defines literacy as "reading, writing and oral communication skills in all subject areas for the purpose of developing and applying critical thinking skills" (p. 1). Although the promotion of critical thinking appears inconsistent with functional literacy practices, an analysis of the document in its entirety reveals otherwise. According to its authors, TLCCA provides "practical, hands-on, classroom ready strategies" (p. 1) in the form of lesson plans and blackline masters organized into reading,

writing, and oral communication sections. Specific lessons and resources contain various education gimmicks found in numerous textbooks and teachers' guides including word wall, place mat, four corners, and jigsaw. The intent is that all teachers from all subject areas will use these strategies so that through repeated exposure students achieve what the document refers to as "payoffs" for each suggested strategy.

Most of the activities prescribed in TLCCA focus on narrow comprehension skills that ask readers to determine the meaning of particular narratives. There is a complete absence of deeper critical thinking strategies such as those described in our previous discussion of critical literacy practices. These strategies might include incorporating oppositional readings into career preparatory courses, engaging in social criticism, or considering the moral acceptability of present global economic and labour market practices. Instead, the document restricts literacy learning to rigid templates that curtail critique and promote conformity by asking students to complete tasks such as organizing ideas, revising and editing, and proofreading their work. Although these exercises are certainly important, when they are employed to the exclusion of other more critical imperatives, they promote a functional, "lingering basics" approach to literacy that fails to foster critical awareness, political voice, or expose the gender, class, and ethnic bias often present in text.

Similarly, although TLCCA encourages group communication etiquette and collaboration, it fails to mention the merits of constructive disagreement, reasoned debate, or how alternative forms of dialogue and entertaining various perspectives promotes democratic learning. Instead, the functional literacy practices contained within the policies and documents we reviewed convey a range of messages to students that protect the existing social and economic structures from meaningful critique or transformation. The widespread employment of these documents, combined with recent accountability measures, ensure that many of these anti-democratic messages will be communicated to students through formal classroom instruction.

In the secondary Business Education curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2005b), the relationship between literacy and career preparation is entirely instrumental. According to the business studies

curriculum policy document, "Many students will learn how their backgrounds and language skills can contribute to business success" (n.p.). This type of socialized thinking, what Marcuse (1964) describes as one-dimensional thought, precludes the development of a critical consciousness based on, "Knowing that society and history are made by contending forces and interests, that human action makes society, and society is unfinished and can be transformed" (Shor, 1992, p. 129). The functional model of literacy advanced by Business Education provides industry with trained human capital and, by undermining critical and democratic awareness, serves the ideological purpose of preventing future workers from considering social alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism.

LITERACY SKILLS AND LABOUR MARKET DEMAND

In spite of the widespread assumption that enhanced literacy is the key determinant in predicting a nation's economic success, the relationship between the two variables is poorly understood. For example, there is no evidence of a direct causal relationship between enhancing a nation's literacy skills and measurably increasing economic and job growth (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999). In spite of rhetoric to the contrary, neither is there available evidence indicating that labour market literacy requirements are generally increasing within industrialized countries (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003). For example, Khran and Lowe (1998) explored how literacy is utilized in the Canadian workplace and concluded the most common literacy requirement was simply reading daily letters and memos. The researchers found that between 20 and 60 per cent of workers rarely or never use their higher-level literacy skills.

> Although we cannot directly compare costs to individuals, firms and the national economy of the two opposite forms of literacy mismatch, it is clear that the literacy surplus (or "under-employment") problem is more widespread, as indicated by the proportion of workers in this category. Evidence of significant numbers of Canadian workers who are seldom required to use their literacy skills in their jobs is evidence of under use of Canada's human resources. (p. 61)

Other comprehensive labour market analyses indicate that many occupations in the growing service-based economy require relatively low levels of knowledge and skill (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003).

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) describes the situation this way:

> Despite the endless rhetoric about how the jobs of the year 2000 will need employees with much higher levels of literacy, the greatest future demand in the labour market appears to be for armed guards, fast food preparation personnel, truck drivers, sanitation workers, nurses aides, and other relatively unspecialized tasks. (p. 122)

Given the low demand for enhanced literacy levels in the contemporary labour market, the increased emphasis on literacy in Ontario career education policies and programs is decidedly ideological because it deflects attention from the deep-rooted structural crises confronting industrialized nations. The outsourcing of quality manufacturing and industrial positions to developing countries has created enduring domestic social and economic problems such as unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and even homelessness for many Canadian workers. The functional literacy practices pursued in current Ontario education policies and practices may produce a compliant and adaptable workforce that acquiesces to these conditions, but they will not empower learners as democratic agents who transform the vocational milieu they confront. The literacy initiatives in Ontario career education support what Freire (2001) disparagingly describes as "the scourge of neoliberalism, with its fatalism and its inflexible negation of the right to dream differently" (p. 22).

DEMOCRATIC LITERACY IN CAREER EDUCATION: SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM

Juxtaposed to functional literacy practices that prepare students to accept a preordained social order, critical literacy instruction emphasizes the democratic importance of progressive social change, and exposes students to alternative ways of thinking beyond the strictures of the neo-liberal global market. Consistent with the previously identified PDL, critical literacy encourages students to challenge prevailing perspectives in ways that create new possibilities, including transforming labour market conditions and improving occupational circumstances for contemporary workers.

The political perspective represented in many of the current literacy practices in the province of Ontario reveals a monolithic neo-liberal

agenda that denies students access to alternative worldviews. This agenda interferes with the fundamental democratic right of students to act as political agents of social reconstruction by transforming the economic and labour market circumstances they confront. Students are depicted by literacy imperatives as objects of, rather than subjects in, the construction of social reality. Freire (1970) explains how critical forms of literacy learning counteract this type of politically paralyzing education: "In problem-posing education, [students] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 70). In critical literacy, students learn to give democratic voice to the vocational challenges they presently confront and develop a deep understanding that social change is a real possibility. This understanding is central to the democratic learning advocated by Freire who, according to Darder (2002) "taught us that, for social transformation to take place, it is important for students to understand and give voice to their personal struggles" (p. 155).

Throughout Ontario career education imperatives, students presently learn to view and name the world through a corporate dominated discourse that conveys particular values, assumptions, and expectations. Alternatively, the primary objective of critical literacy in career education is heightening student awareness on how discourse influences our view of social reality. Apple (2000) describes this alternate conception as "critical literacy, powerful literacy, political literacy which enables the growth of genuine understandings and control of all the spheres of social life in which we participate" (p. 42). To counter the indoctrinatory effects of neo-liberal discourse, critical literacy instruction would encourage students to read conflicting and multiple sources of information to help them evaluate, both morally and epistemologically, the claims and directives they encounter. While examining various perspectives within these narratives, students might ask how the included information was selected, whose interests it serves, and consider alternative explanations that contradict the advocated position. When students understand the particular context of the vocational problems they confront and possess the conceptual capacity to describe

and challenge that context, they become political agents of social change working democratically to improve their own lives and the lives of others.

Critical literacy views debate, disagreement, and dialogue as healthy educational activities and necessary components of a fully functioning democratic society. Darder (2002) describes the dialogical learning experience this way:

> By fostering an open dialogue with my students, I can assist them in the formation of greater critical understanding and help them overcome debilitating forms of resistance. Creating a critical space in which students feel safe to express themselves provides us the opportunity to both support and challenge our students to transcend reductionist conclusions which distort their reading of the world and can interfere with their process of empowerment. (p. 167)

Through critical literacy instruction, students understand that many of their supposed skill deficits are actually ideological fictions engineered to distract attention from deep-rooted, structural, socio-economic problems. Rather than learning how to complete employment and loan applications or follow employer directives, students might explore the level of corporate profits and the exorbitant salaries paid to high-ranking corporate executives. These salaries could then be compared with the average incomes of Canadian retail or service industry workers to provoke further discussion about the moral and democratic acceptability of the disparity. Rather than participating in mock job interviews, students could also explore how and why the traditional interview process marginalizes disadvantaged groups, and consider alternative hiring processes that are more fair and inclusive such as affirmative action policies.

Through textual analysis and critique, critical literacy in career education elucidates the connection between personal circumstances and social organization, and promotes student understanding of how the latter influences vocational experience. A literacy lesson in democratic career education might focus on the unequal power relations between workers and corporations, discuss the substance of various collective agreements, or explore the current treatment of part-time and low wage workers in the neo-liberal economy. Rather than blindly extolling the virtues of technology, a critical literacy lesson in career education could

investigate its general impact on employment opportunities and workers, and question who profits or gets hurt by its development and implementation.

CONCLUSION

An examination of secondary level career education in Ontario illustrates that functional literacy practices impact deleteriously on principles for democratic learning. Functional conceptions of literacy advance a socially reproductive model of learning that serves to undermine the democratic agency of learners, while perpetuating a cycle of marginalization through "false generosity" (Freire, 1970, p. 58). Ontario career education literacy policy also conveys the implicit message to students that literacy learning is only valuable when linked to occupational or labour market preparation. Further, we have suggested that the current emphasis on literacy skills as a means to promote economic prosperity is inconsistent with actual labour market conditions. Hence, the current focus on functional literacy as a component of career preparation simply distracts educators and others from the structural shortcomings of neo-liberal capitalism.

In response to the concerns identified in this article, we propose including an alternate conception of literacy in all Canadian career education programs. By considering both text and context, critical literacy instruction effectively counteracts passive social reproduction, addresses the systemic shortcomings of neo-liberalism, and exposes the ideological fictions regarding current labour market conditions. Critical literacy cultivates historical awareness and democratic agency through active inquiry, questioning, and dialogue to improve the individual and collective working lives of students. Given current education policy formation processes, and the increasing links between government and corporations committed to both neo-liberalism and functional conceptions of literacy, generating such change presents considerable challenges. The charge before educators is a somewhat daunting one, then, but one well worth pursuing if they truly believe in an education that prepares students to meet the demands of participatory citizenship in a meaningful democratic society.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (2000). *Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Crouch, C., Finegold, D., & Sako, M. (1999). *Are skills the answer? The political economy of skill creation in advanced industrialized countries.* London, UK: Oxford University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *The psychology of optimal experience.* New York: Harpercollins.

Darder, A. (2002). *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A pedagogy of love.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Freire, P. (2001). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction.* New York: Longman.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J., & Graham, B. (2001). Democratic learning in career education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26(3), 79-100.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J., & Welsh, B. (2003). Career education and labour market conditions: The skills gap myth. *Journal of Educational Thought, 37*,(1), 5-21.

Knoblauch, C.H., & Brannon, L. (1993). *Critical literacy: Language and the ideal of literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Reed Publishing.

Krahn, H., & Lowe, G. S. (1998). *Literacy utilization in Canadian workplaces*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development.

Lankshear, C. (1993). Functional literacy from a Freirean point of view. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter.* London, UK: Routledge.

Levin, B. (1998). An epidemic of education policy: (What) can we learn from each other? *Comparative Education, 34*(2), 131-141.

Luce-Kapler, R. (2004). *Writing with, through, and beyond the text: An ecology of language.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Marcuse, H. (1964). *One dimensional man.* Boston: Beacon.

McLaren, P., & Lankshear, C. (1993). Critical literacy and the postmodern turn. In C. Lankshear & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy, politics, praxis and the postmodern.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Literacy in Ontario: The rewards are for life*. Toronto: The Queen's Printer.

Ministry of Education. (1998). *Ontario secondary schools detailed discussion document*. Toronto: The Queen's Printer.

Ministry of Education. (1999). *Choices into action: Guidance and career education program policy for Ontario elementary and secondary schools*. Toronto: The Queen's Printer.

Ministry of Education. (2000). *The Ontario curriculum: Grades 11 and 12, social sciences and the humanities.* Toronto: The Queen's Printer.

Ministry of Education. (2003). *Think literacy: Cross curricular approaches grades 7-12* Toronto: The Queen's Printer.

Ministry of Education. (2005a). *The Ontario curriculum: Grades 11 and 12, English*. Retrieved April 14, 2007, from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english1112curr.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2005b). *The Ontario curriculum: Grades 11 and 12, business education*. Retrieved November 22, 2005, from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/business1112curr.txt

Ministry of Education. (2005c). The arts: Ontario curriculum grades 9 and 10. Retrieved April 14, 2007 from http://orion.math.uwaterloo.ca/~hwolkowi/stjude.d/Grade10Curriculum/arts910curr.pdf

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Torney-Purta, J., Schwille, J., & Amadeo, J. A. (1999). *Civic education across countries: Twenty-four case studies from the IEA Civic Education Project*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

Emery J. Hyslop-Margison is a Tier II Canada Research Chair, Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Democratic Learning in Career Education in the Department of Education at Concordia University.

Laura Pinto is a PhD candidate in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.