A Critical Analysis of the Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy

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ABSTRACT: This paper consists of a critical analysis of Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy (FDCL). FDCL is chosen for analysis because it is familiar to, and widely used by, scholars and practitioners in the field of critical literacy. The analysis focuses on what FDCL is and what limitations it has. The purpose of the analysis is to provide an in-depth examination of FDCL and to show what it can and cannot do for those interested in the research and teaching of FDCL.

Keywords: critical literacy, four dimensions of critical literacy, critical reading, literacy education

Résumé : Ce document consiste en une analyse critique des quatre dimensions de la littératie critique (QDLC) de Lewison, Flint et Van Sluys (2002). QDLC sont choisies pour l'analyse car elles sont familières et largement utilisées par les chercheurs universitaires et les praticiens du domaine de la littératie critique. L'analyse se concentre sur ce que sont les QDLC et sur ses limites. Le but de l'analyse est de fournir une évaluation approfondie des QDLC et de montrer ce qu'elles peuvent et ne peuvent pas faire pour ceux qui s'intéressent à la recherche et à l'enseignement de celles-ci.

Mots-clés: littératie critique, quatre dimensions de la littératie critique, lecture critique, littératie en éducation

Introduction

Critical literacy investigates the relationships among language, social practice, and power. It is derived from, and linked closely to, the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher, activist, and educator.

> Historically speaking, critical literacy has its roots reaching deep into critical theory, philosophy, linguistics, and discourse studies. Within English-speaking countries, the translation and publication of Paulo Freire's work to English in the 1970s, along with his collaboration with Donald Macedo and Ira Shor, mark a watershed in the development of critical literacy as a distinct theoretical and pedagogical field. (Knobel, 2007, p. vii)

Freire advocated adult literacy campaigns in Brazil and reformulated education as a "site for emancipation, empowerment, and social justice" (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 5). In his pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire (1984) proposed that literacy education embodied in reflection and action is

meant to empower the underprivileged through a dialogical process. He argued that educators should work with learners to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For Freire, being literate means not only the ability to read texts, but also the capacity to take action to transform the world and promote social justice.

Building on Freire's work, Anderson and Irvine (1993) defined critical literacy as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (p. 82). Hence, the goal of critical literacy "is to challenge these unequal power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). Literacy education perceived from this critical slant is no longer merely the instruction of literacy skills such as reading and writing. It is broadened to include the fostering of the ability to problematize and redefine ideologies depicted in the texts and power relations experienced in our daily lives.

I was exposed to critical literacy approximately 14 years ago and was fascinated by this "non-traditional" concept of literacy education. Ever since, I have become a strong advocate for critical literacy. As a teacher educator working with pre-service teachers in a university setting, I have researched critical literacy and tried to link it to classroom practices. Critical literacy is always one of the main themes in all the literacy/language arts methods courses I teach in the teacher education program. The pre-service teachers in my courses are required not only to read articles about critical literacy, but also to design and implement an instructional unit on critical literacy with elementary students during their practicum.

The reaction of the pre-service teachers to critical literacy is mixed. Some are surprised to be introduced to this area of literacy education that is seldom brought up in a traditional literacy/language arts methods course in college and cannot wait to implement it in their future classrooms. However, some mistakenly think that critical literacy is simply a set of higher-order thinking skills geared toward gifted or upper elementary students while it is supposed to be taught especially to the marginalized, such as culturally diverse students, to empower them in and outside of school (Lee, 2011). The challenge I have in teaching critical literacy is also shared by other teacher educators. Once in a while, I receive emails from professors in other universities who encounter a similar issue in teaching critical literacy. For example, the following is an email message from Dr. Karen Eppley:

> For the last two semesters, I've used Vivian Vasquez's [2014] Negotiating Critical Literacies with [Young] Children with some limited success. As we read the Vasquez text, I asked the pre-service teachers to do what the children did in each chapter: Identify a "social problem" in their lives and take steps to solve it. Students wrote letters, created Facebook groups, and spread awareness of topics ranging from over-priced textbooks to all day kindergarten to depression. This seemed moderately successful, but the major sticking point was that they saw the projects as unattainable for children. They didn't connect the importance of their own critical stance with what they might inspire in children. (K. Eppley, personal communication, August 5, 2016)

Instead of blaming the pre-service teachers for not "getting it," I am wondering if I have done the right thing in my classroom. Specifically, I think that it is time to reflect critically on critical literacy and its applicability in the classroom. This critical self-reflection is aligned with Harste's (2008) recommendation about how we should treat what we know:

> If we treat what we know as fact, we are in effect saying we have nothing to learn. Even worse, we have arrested our own learning process. This is why good learners – no matter how developed their internal theory of the world is or how much experience they have had – have to believe that at least one tenet in their existing theory is wrong. Believing most of what we know to be right allows us to act, but knowing one tenet is wrong and not being sure of which tenet it is allows us to learn. (p. 35)

To examine critical literacy critically, I will focus on Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy (FDCL) in this paper. Lewison et al.'s (2002) framework is singled out for analysis for two reasons. First, FDCL has been proposed as a result of a comprehensive review of research on critical literacy conducted for a period of three decades. Therefore, FDCL is not simply based on one single research study, but represents the studies done by many researchers in different places and times. Second, FDCL is chosen for analysis because I use it in my literacy/language arts methods courses. The pre-service teachers are required to read and understand FDCL and apply it in analyzing texts as well as in designing lesson plans. The analysis of FDCL serves as a critical reflection on what I know and teach. Through this self-reflective process, I hope to learn more about FDCL and what it can and cannot do for the pre-service teachers. I also hope that the analysis will benefit scholars/practitioners who are interested in the scholarship of FDCL and its applicability in the classroom.

Methodology

To analyze FDCL, I will adopt a hermeneutic reconstructive process, which Carspecken (1996) explains in detail as follows:

> The basic process involved in human understanding is hermeneutic, and hermeneutic processes involve a movement from initial holistic modes of understanding toward more explicit and delineated modes of understanding, which, in turn, modify one's holistic grasp of meaning. A circular process is involved: movement from the tacit (intuitive and undifferentiated) toward the explicit (delineated and differentiated) and then back to the holistic. (p. 95)

Another way to conceptualize the hermeneutic reconstructive process, or what Crotty (2003) calls "the hermeneutic circle," is to think of it as "understanding the whole through grasping its parts, and comprehending the meaning of parts through divining the whole" (p. 92).

Therefore, I will begin the analysis of FDCL by looking at FDCL as a whole (i.e., a holistic understanding). This will help us understand what FDCL is. Then each dimension of FDCL will be analyzed for explicit meaning reconstructions (i.e., an explicit understanding of parts). This includes a discussion of what each dimension is and what limitations each dimension has. Finally, the limitations of FDCL as a whole will be elaborated on. In what follows, the analysis of FDCL through this whole-part-whole hermeneutic reconstructive process is presented in detail.

FDCL as a Whole

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed a range of definitions of critical literacy that appeared in the research and professional literature for a span of three decades and synthesized them into four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. The first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, questions the routines, beliefs, habits, theories, practices, etc. that we encounter and are used to in our lives. It focuses on interrogating our everyday world, including "how social norms are communicated through the various arenas of popular culture and how identities are shaped by these experiences" (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 8). To paraphrase Luke and Freebody (1997), this dimension interrogates texts by asking how the texts try to position us. The second dimension, interrogating multiple viewpoints, is meant to make difference visible and subject it to critical scrutiny instead of striving for consensus and conformity. Luke and Freebody (1997) suggest that multiple and contradictory accounts of an event be juxtaposed to investigate whose voices are heard and whose voices are missing. The third dimension focuses on the sociopolitical issues such as gender bias, bullying, and poverty that are related to students' lives. It goes beyond the personal concerns and attempts to situate them in the sociopolitical contexts/systems (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999). The last dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, is aligned with Freire's (1984) proposition that literacy learners should be actors rather than spectators in the world. The purpose is to empower the underprivileged to challenge unequal power relations, redefine them, and take action to transform their status quo. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, Lewison et al. (2002) argue that they are actually intertwined. For example, action can be hardly taken without first disrupting and recognizing the biased norm.

A Critical Analysis of FDCL as Parts

In this section, each dimension of FDCL is discussed in detail. I will use a children's book, *The Lady in the Box* by Ann McGovern (1999), to explain what each dimension means and what limitations each dimension has.

The Lady in the Box takes place during a freezing cold winter. A boy, Ben, and his sister, Lizzie, know that there is a lady, Dorrie, who lives outside in a box over a warm air vent near a deli. The children worry about the kind-looking lady and bring food and clothes out of their apartment for her. When the deli owner bans Dorrie from the sidewalk, the children's mother convinces him to let the woman return to her space by a heat grate. Ben and Lizzie end up becoming friends with Dorrie and volunteer to serve food at a neighborhood soup kitchen to help more homeless people.

Disrupting the Commonplace

Disrupting the commonplace is problematizing the norm, the routine, or what most of the people do or take for granted. For example, in *The Lady in the Box*, an act of kindness, i.e., helping the homeless, is portrayed as something that should be practiced not only by adults, but also children like Ben and Lizzie. In other words, helping the homeless is a "commonplace" promoted in the book. While it is true that we should help the homeless, the first dimension of FDCL asks us to disrupt or question this commonplace. For example, one question we can ask to disrupt this commonplace is, "Is it safe for kids like Ben and Lazzie to talk to a stranger or a homeless person?" In the story, Dorrie happens to be a friendly homeless woman, but, in reality, this is not always the case. Therefore, it may be dangerous especially for children without adults' company to talk to or help the homeless.

Disrupting the commonplace helps us "read against the grain" (Van Sluys, 2005, p. 21). It asks us to question the messages, assumptions, ideologies, etc. in the text. However, disrupting the commonplace does not emphasize the importance of comprehending the text. Specifically, in order to question what the author claims or implies in the text, we need to comprehend the text first. Comprehending the text is presupposed by disrupting the commonplace, but is not included as one of the four dimensions. Text comprehension does not necessarily mean that we have to agree with the author – we can disagree or abstain. For example, disrupting the commonplace is a case where the reader deconstructs the claim made by the author after the text is comprehended. Specifically, the sociopolitical systems, ideologues, and power relations claimed or embedded in the text are first comprehended and then unpacked/disrupted by the reader. Therefore, FDCL is lacking in emphasizing the importance of text comprehension.

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Interrogating multiple viewpoints highlights the importance of examining an issue from multiple angles in order to have a better understanding of the issue. In *The Lady in the Box*, for example, the homeless issue is presented primarily from the children's (Ben's and Lizzie's) perspective. In addition, the voices of the homeless woman (Dorrie), Ben and Lizzie's mother, and the deli owner are also included in the story. It is important to include Dorrie's voice in the story because the

voice of the homeless is usually silent in a mainstream society. Our view of the homeless often comes from the perspective of those other than the homeless. Therefore, *The Lady in the Box* presents a voice from the marginalized and helps us see the issue from a different perspective.

While interrogating multiple viewpoints gives us a better picture of an issue, it does not necessarily provide a solution to the issue. In fact, after listening to different voices, we are often left in a stalemate due to a lack of criteria for adjudicating these voices. For example, Dorrie in *The Lady in the Box* represents a voice from the marginalized, a voice often oblivious to the mainstream society. Through Dorrie's story, we have a better understanding of what it is like to be homeless and why someone is homeless. We also know that some homeless people can be quite friendly like Dorrie. Yet we can also relate to the stand taken by the deli owner who does not want to have a homeless woman sleep near his store and affect his business. Investigating multiple viewpoints only points out the importance of paying attention to different voices, but does not provide specific criteria for us to judge whose voice is more valid. The primary purpose of critical literacy is to empower the marginalized against the dominant. This purpose, however, is hardly justified without criteria to validate one voice against another.

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

The Lady in the Box is a children's book that deals with social issues or what Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) call a social issues book. By writing a homeless woman's story primarily from two children's perspectives, the author presents a story beyond the personal level and brings sociopolitical issues, such as poverty and homelessness, to the attention of the readers. Indeed, examining personal issues situated within a sociopolitical context helps us better understand the personal issues and how they relate to, and are shaped by, the broad sociopolitical system. For example, Dorrie can be regarded as a "victim" of the sociopolitical system which still needs to be improved to care for the marginalized. Specifically, *The Lady in the Box* is not simply a personal story, but a reflection of a broad sociopolitical issue that has to be addressed by our society.

Nevertheless, while sociopolitical issues are important, they are not the only issues we are concerned about in reading a text. In fact, focusing narrowly on sociopolitical issues limits what we can do in reading texts. There are other kinds of reading such as efferent reading and aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 2005) that are relativized when the focus is on sociopolitical issues only. In efferent reading, "attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 11). An efferent reader reads, for example, *The Lady in the Box* to find out how the story begins, how many characters there are in the story, what the main issue is that is to be resolved, whether the issue is resolved at the end of the story, etc. In contrast, the aesthetic reader "pays attention to – savors – the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations,

scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 11). An aesthetic reader of *The Lady in the Box*, for instance, puts himself/herself in Dorrie's shoes and tries to picture what it is like to live in a box in wintertime.

While other kinds of reading, such as efferent reading and aesthetic reading, are not geared directly toward the sociopolitical issues, they help us relate personally to the plight the character of the story is in and provide information about how the personal issue is linked to the sociopolitical system. In other words, focusing on sociopolitical issues relativizes the importance of other kinds of reading and their contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of the sociopolitical issues.

Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice

Lewison et al. (2002) suggest that "one cannot take action against oppression or promote social justice without expanded understandings and perspectives gained from the other three dimensions" (pp. 383-384). Therefore, taking action is intertwined with what we have learned from the other three dimensions. Take for example the episode in *The Lady in the Box* where Dorrie is driven away by the deli owner. After hearing the voices of Dorrie and the deli owner (which is linked to the second dimension: interrogating multiple viewpoints), we can understand why Ben, Lizzie, and their mother take action to help Dorrie. However, we can also choose to side with the deli owner if we think he has a good reason to ask Dorrie not to sleep in a box in front of his store. This shows that the fourth dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, is closely tied to the previous dimensions, especially the second dimension – interrogating multiple viewpoints in this case, on the one hand, and that what action is taken depends on whose voice we believe is more valid, on the other hand.

Recall that, in the discussion of the second dimension, we see the difficulty of judging whose voice is more valid because of a lack of criteria to make such a judgement. Here, again, the same problem resurfaces. Without criteria to evaluate different voices, we have a hard time deciding what action to take, i.e., whether to side with Dorrie or the deli owner. The primary project of FDCL is to empower the marginalized or the oppressed to take action against the dominant or the oppressors. Without criteria, how can we distinguish the oppressed from the oppressors? We may even fall into the trap of merely reversing the oppressor-oppressed position against which Freire (1984) warns us, i.e., the replacement of the oppressors with the new oppressors who used to be oppressed.

More on the Limitations of FDCL as a Whole

The above analysis shows that FDCL serves as a practical framework for literacy educators/learners, especially novices, to put critical literacy into

practice. However, there are also concerns about FDCL that should not be ignored. In what follows, I will elaborate on the limitations of FDCL as a whole.

Comprehending the Text

Comprehending the text includes recognizing the story/text structure such as the setting, initiating events, internal reactions, goals, attempts, and outcomes, on the one hand, and summarizing the story/text (i.e., synthesizing important ideas in the text), on the other hand. Comprehending the text is presupposed by all of the four dimensions of critical literacy, but not included explicitly as one of the dimensions. Comprehending the text is actually so important that it should not be simply implied. This is because, without a thorough understanding of the text, it is hard to detect any norms, biases, and stereotypes (i.e., commonplaces) in the text, let alone disrupt them. Similarly, without comprehending the text, we are not able to tell whose voices are heard in the text and whose voices are not. Teasing out sociopolitical issues and taking action in response to what we have found from the text also call for a good understanding of the text. In light of its importance, comprehending the text should precede the four dimensions of critical literacy and should be included as one, if not the first one, of the dimensions of critical literacy.

Criteria

FDCL problematizes the claim (or commonplace) made by the author in the text and argues that the claim should be interrogated from multiple perspectives. Voices unheard in the text should be also taken into consideration in formulating a well-rounded understanding of the scenario. This understanding helps to analyze sociopolitical ramifications and contributes to action taken to promote social justice. However, in order to interrogate different viewpoints critically, i.e., to evaluate whose claim is valid and whose claim is not, we need to have criteria to help us make such an evaluation. It is important that we justify our action according to the criteria upon which all participants agree. Therefore, for FDCL to be feasible, a set of criteria has to be articulated to evaluate different viewpoints and justify action taken to promote social justice.

Gee (1993) also recognizes the importance of assuming an inclusive attitude toward different viewpoints, but he points out a problem with this pluralistic view:

> If no sign system can be validated as against any other, if all sign systems are rooted simply in historically derived social practices instantiating the desires and claims to power of various groups, then how can we morally condemn the school's (and society's) treatment of the black child whose story we have seen above? How, indeed, can this black child - and her group - come to form a viable theory and practice resistance? (p. 291)

To tackle the problem, i.e., to morally condemn and resist social injustice, Gee (1993) suggests two conceptual principles that serve as the basis of ethical human discourse:

> [First,] that something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as "goods") is always a good reason not to do it. [Second,] one always has the ethical obligation to try to explicate (render overt and conscious) any social practice that there is reason to believe advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups. (pp. 292-293)

While it is not my intention to "prescribe" any criteria for evaluating different viewpoints, Gee's proposal of the principles governing ethical human discourse above is put forth as an example to show the importance of having criteria to evaluate different viewpoints. Without such guiding principles/criteria, we are likely to fall into the trap of relativism where everything goes. For Gee, the validity of discourse is evaluated against the principles of not harming someone else and not advantaging oneself or one's group over other people or other groups. These principles are related to shared interests. Specifically, doing something not to harm someone else or not to advantage oneself or one's group over other people or other groups is showing concern about someone else's interests. In *The Lady in the Box*, both Dorrie and the deli owner have a good reason to support their own claim. Specifically, Dorrie as a homeless lady should be cared for while the deli owner does not want his business to be affected because Dorrie sleeps in front of his store. In applying the criterion of shared interests, we know that it does not meet Dorrie's interest to drive her away from the store, nor does it meet the deli owner's interest to have Dorrie sleep in front of his store. One possible solution to meet both parties' interests, for example, is to promote a government-supported housing project where homeless people like Dorrie can be accommodated.

Scope of FDCL

Focusing on sociopolitical issues is one of the four dimensions of critical literacy. It is true that the broad sociopolitical factors do shape our personal understanding of an issue and should be taken into consideration. This is why Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) argue:

> 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. (p. 3)

Linking parts (personal issues) to the whole (sociopolitical issues) helps us realize their connection and take action to resolve the issues.

While focusing on sociopolitical issues allows us to look into the systemic ramifications of an issue, it also limits the scope of what FDCL can do for us. Specifically, there are many purposes of reading texts. We read to

obtain information such as reading a user's manual to learn how to operate a car. We also read to simply appreciate the beauty of words such as reading a poem. We sometimes read a story (e.g., a bed-time story) to someone neither to get information from the book, nor to appreciate its literary techniques, but to enjoy the intimate relationship with the listener (usually our child) during the reading time. We need to keep in mind what FDCL can do and cannot do for us. While FDCL helps us investigate sociopolitical issues, it does not put other purposes of reading as its priorities. Therefore, literacy educators should be aware of this limitation of FDCL and should not teach FDCL to the exclusion of other types of reading that serve different purposes and are no less important.

Conclusion

This paper presents a critical analysis of FDCL as it is a framework widely known among the scholars and practitioners of critical literacy. The discussion begins with a literature review of critical literacy. Then FDCL is presented and analyzed through a hermeneutic reconstructive process.

The purpose of doing a critical analysis of FDCL is not to dismantle it, but to understand what it can and cannot do. FDCL does provide concrete and feasible dimensions for newcomers to implement critical literacy in their classrooms. Otherwise, it would be difficult to tease out applicable measures from high-level theoretical narratives about critical literacy to implement in the classroom. Yet FDCL is not without flaws. First, comprehending the text is a crucial aspect of all kinds of reading, but is not included explicitly as one of the dimensions in FDCL. Without comprehending the text, we can hardly make use of the text we read, let alone put critical literacy into practice. Second, there are no criteria provided to evaluate various voices presented in the text. Without criteria, we are not able to justify our action taken to promote social justice. Finally, FDCL focuses, in particular, on sociopolitical issues and relativizes other purposes of reading texts. The pros and cons of FDCL are presented in this paper to help us better understand what it is and how it can be used in our classrooms.

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