

How to Teach Big Words in Critical Literacy to Pre-service Teachers

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Abstract: While critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, it does not seem to take root in the classroom. There are a plethora of terms/concepts used in critical literacy that are not so “user-friendly” to classroom teachers. In this paper, I will share how I as a teacher educator teach some “big words” in critical literacy in a way that pre-service teachers can relate to and apply in an elementary classroom. Specifically, I will present a few terms/concepts in critical literacy that the pre-service teachers in my elementary literacy/language arts methods courses find difficult to grasp. I will also discuss how I help the pre-service teachers understand these terms/concepts and connect them to their future classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to bring the high-level theorizing in critical literacy down to the language that pre-service teachers can comprehend and explain to their future students in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice in critical literacy.

Résumé: Alors que la littératie critique a été l'objet de recherches intensives, et est devenue très connue dans le milieu universitaire, elle ne semble pas prendre racine dans la salle de classe. Il existe une pléthore de termes/concepts utilisés en littératie critique qui ne sont pas faciles à mettre en pratique par les enseignants. Dans cet article, je partagerai comment en tant que formateur d'enseignants, j'enseigne quelques « grands mots » de la littératie critique d'une manière que les enseignants en formation peuvent comprendre et l'appliquer dans une classe au primaire. Plus précisément, je présenterai quelques termes/concepts en littératie critique que les enseignants en formation initiale dans mes cours d'arts du langage trouvent difficile à comprendre. Je discuterai aussi de la manière dont j'aide les enseignants en formation initiale à comprendre ces termes / concepts et à les relier à leurs futures salles de classe. Le but de cet article est de faire le lien entre la théorie et la pratique en littératie critique pour que les

enseignants en formation puissent comprendre et l'expliquer à leurs futurs élèves. De cette façon, ils pourront combler le fossé entre la théorie et la pratique dans ce domaine.

Introduction

Critical literacy is a field in literacy education that is traceable genealogically to the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian literacy educator and activist. Freire along with his colleague Macedo (1987) argues that educators should teach literacy learners to read the word and the world critically. Literacy training should not only focus on the learning of literacy skills, but also be considered “a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 187). Similarly, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1984) proposes that literacy education embodied in reflection and action is meant to empower the oppressed through a dialogical process. Freire’s critical approach to literacy education and his collaborations with Donald Macedo and Ira Shor “mark a watershed in the development of critical literacy as a distinct theoretical and pedagogical field” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. vii).

Building on Freire’s work, Anderson and Irvine (1993) define 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). The goal of critical literacy “is to challenge these unequal power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). In parallel, Lankshear and McLaren (1993) believe that critical literacy makes possible, among other things, “a more adequate and accurate ‘reading’ of the world, [so that] people can enter into ‘rewriting’ the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally” (p. xviii). Vasquez (2001, 2010, 2014, 2015) elevates the discussion of critical literacy to the ontological level and describes critical literacy as a way of being that should cut across the entire curriculum. Literacy education perceived from this critical slant is no longer merely the instruction of literacy skills. 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 more than 15 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 the elementary education program 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 have taught in the elementary teacher preparation 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, in reality, it should serve to empower students, especially the marginalized such as culturally diverse students, in and outside of school. 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)

Similarly, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) found that "teachers have read a little and maybe attended a conference session, but they readily admit they don't know much about what critical literacy is or what it means for them as teachers" (p. 382). Therefore, while critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, it does not seem to take root

in the classroom. Yet, Janks (2014) argued that “critical literacy should not be seen as transient, like fads and fashions that come and go, but as essential to the ongoing project of education across the curriculum” (p. 349). In order to address the lack of knowledge, and the misinterpretation, of critical literacy, it is important to bring critical literacy from the “ivory tower” down to the level to which pre-service and in-service teachers can relate. There are a plethora of terms/concepts used in critical literacy that are challenging for pre-service teachers to understand and apply in their future teaching. Therefore, I will share in this paper how I teach some of the “big words” in critical literacy in a way that pre-service teachers can relate to and apply in an elementary classroom. Bringing the high-level theorizing in critical literacy down to the language that pre-service teachers can comprehend and explain to their future students will help bridge the gap between theory and practice in critical literacy. In what follows, I will present a few terms/concepts in critical literacy that the pre-service teachers in my elementary literacy/language arts methods courses find difficult to grasp. I will also discuss how I help the pre-service teachers understand these terms/concepts and connect them to their future classrooms.

Multiple Literacies and Social Practices

One of the terms/concepts about critical literacy with which the pre-service teachers in my class struggle is concerned with the definition of literacy. Specifically, most of the pre-service teachers think that literacy refers to literacy skills such as reading and writing. This skill-based conception of literacy is inadequate compared to the social approach to literacy that has a substantial impact on how literacy is viewed in critical literacy. The shift to the social approach places attention on local context and argues that there are multiple, socially embedded literacies (Street, 2001). The concept of multiple literacies intertwined with social practices is aligned with the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g., Gee, 1994; Street, 1984, 1993):

Instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don't have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary. When coupled with the notion of multiple literacies, literacy can be thought of as 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.
(Harste, 2003, p. 8)

NLS has not only opened our eyes to literacy as a social practice, but also ushered in an era of plural literacies along with their social practices. There is no single literacy or social practice that is superior to all others, but different literacies and their corresponding social practices that are applicable to different groups of people and sociocultural contexts.

To help the pre-service teachers understand the concept of multiple literacies and social practices, I designed a “duck” activity. Specifically, I wrote the word “duck” on the white board and asked the pre-service teachers to jot down on a piece of paper what came to their minds when they saw or heard this word. The connections they made to “duck” often included “a bird,” “a bird with feathers,” “cute little ducklings,” “quack,” “ducks in a lake,” etc., which were listed on the white board. I did not comment on, or ask why they came up with, the connections before everyone had a chance to contribute to the list. Sometimes, I was pleased to hear such connections as “It reminds me of hunting,” “I like roasted duck,” and “You duck when a ball comes toward you” because these connections were different from the rest. A few pre-service teachers even chose to draw about ducks instead of writing about them.

After the list seemed to be exhaustive, I asked the pre-service teachers why they made the connections. Their reasons ranged from one simple statement such as “It’s cute” to a long story about a duck hunting expedition. My next question for them was, “Why does the same word ‘duck’ mean different things to you?” This question pushed the pre-service teachers to think about how a word is given a meaning or meanings. My goal was to guide the pre-service teachers to understand that the word “duck” is interpreted in many ways because our experiences with it are different. Furthermore, our experiences are closely tied to our social practices (Harste, 2003). For example, I asked one of the pre-service teachers why she thought the duck was cute. She said that she fed ducks in the lake near her house when she was little. She loved the way they ate and thought that they were so cute. In this case, the duck was given a meaning, i.e., “It’s cute,” based on her past experience or social practice with the duck. It is a social practice because the experience of feeding ducks is shared by other people as well. Similarly, the word “duck” reminded another pre-service teacher of his duck hunting experience (again, his social practice). Therefore, duck hunting stood out among other connections due to his experience

with ducks. For those who chose to draw, they shared wonderful stories about their drawings. Through this activity, the pre-service teachers were able to understand that literacies are multiple and tied closely to different social practices. The pre-service teachers became aware that people have different interpretations of the seemingly same phenomenon, e.g., the duck, due to their different experiences/social practices.

Marginalization

Another word/concept that is usually hard for the pre-service teachers to understand is the relationship between literacy education and “marginalization” or “the marginalized.” According to Chetty (2012), marginalization is a process by which individuals are excluded from society based on various traits, such as social class, race, language, etc., to maintain the dominant hegemonic power structure. It seems difficult for the pre-service teachers to link literacy education to the marginalization of students because literacy education is supposed to serve as an avenue to success. However, little do the pre-service teachers know that literacy, like a double-edged sword, can be used to empower or marginalize students (Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2011). This is why Harste (2003) says that we as literacy educators should know what literacy and its corresponding social practice are in place in our classroom and who benefits from this definition of literacy along with its social practice and who is marginalized. We should make our classroom a safe learning environment where students feel their home literacies and social practices are respected.

To help the pre-service teachers have a “taste” of what it is like to have their literacy, along with its social practice, marginalized, I had a follow-up discussion with them built on the previous “duck” activity. Specifically, I told them that among all the interpretations, stories, and drawings about the word “duck,” I thought that “a duck is a bird with feathers” in the form of writing instead of drawing was the best answer because it was something I could relate to. In addition, I told them that if they were asked to define the word “duck,” the correct answer should be: “A duck is a bird with feathers.” Upon hearing this, some of the pre-service teachers looked puzzled, and others, surprised. “How do you feel if the only definition of the word ‘duck’ is a bird with feathers?” I asked. Some whispered, “Why?” Others said, “I feel disappointed because my interpretation is not chosen.” One of the pre-service teachers complained, “It’s not fair. I think my interpretation is pretty good.”

A few of them seemed happy and said, “I think the definition is fine. That’s what I have.” I explained to the pre-service teachers that by defining the word “duck” as a bird with feathers, I included those whose definition was the same as mine in the “dominant literacy” circle, but marginalized those whose definition deviated from mine.

Critical Literacy versus Critical Thinking

Critical literacy is often believed by the pre-service teachers to be critical thinking or higher-order thinking defined, for example, in Bloom’s (1984) taxonomy, a revision of which was published by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). The idea is that some types of learning require more cognitive processing than others. In the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy, the abilities/skills to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create are thought to be of a higher order, requiring different learning and teaching methods, than the abilities/skills to remember and understand facts/concepts. Higher-order thinking involves using complex judgmental skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

The pre-service teachers tend to confuse critical thinking and critical literacy probably because they have been exposed to Bloom’s taxonomy, along with its revised version, in previous courses. Though critical thinking is related to critical literacy, the former defined in the sense of higher-order thinking is inadequate in encompassing the latter. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) distinguish critical literacy from critical thinking as follows:

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)

Therefore, critical literacy practices differ from critical thinking skills in that the former are set in a sociopolitical context oriented

toward identifying unequal power relationships to promote social justice.

To illustrate the difference between critical thinking and critical literacy, I asked the pre-service teachers to read an article on sports. In the first stage, they were asked to find the thesis of the article and evaluate whether the evidence used by the author to support the thesis was convincing. I explained to them that this kind of understanding was concerned more with critical thinking, which focused on whether the article was logically organized and whether the author's argument was well supported. In the next stage, the pre-service teachers were asked to question or problematize sociopolitical issues embedded in the article and investigate them from multiple perspectives. Some of the pre-service teachers found that there were only male figures portrayed as athletes in the article while there was no mention of female athletes. By uncovering such gender bias in sports, the pre-service teachers were not only thinking critically, but also practicing critical literacy. This activity helped the pre-service teachers understand that while critical thinking and critical literacy overlap in certain aspects, the latter should not be reduced to the former.

Sociopolitical Issues

The focus on sociopolitical issues in critical literacy is something hard for the pre-service teachers to link to their teaching in elementary classrooms. Specifically, the majority of the pre-service teachers I have worked with think that literacy education is concerned mainly with the teaching of literacy skills. From this perspective, literacy is usually considered neutral, and literacy education is reduced to the instruction of academic skills. There are at least two problems with this reductionist perspective on literacy education. First, recall that we talked about literacies as multiple social practices previously in this paper. The instruction of literacy is not neutral, but deals with the social aspects of literacies. Teaching literacies without critically examining their underlying social practices runs the risk of perpetuating questionable values and norms embedded in such literacies/social practices (Freitas & McAuley, 2008; McIntyre, 1997). Specifically, if literacy is assumed to be apolitical, literacy learners do not only learn literacy skills, but take the embedded social practices for granted. In this sense, literacy education actually victimizes the learners (Campano, 2015). Another problem with the reductionist perspective on literacy education is that it ignores the fact that literacy learners, including

elementary students, have to deal with sociopolitical issues such as peer pressure, bullying, poverty, to name a few, in school. Not dealing with the sociopolitical aspects of literacy presents only a slanted view of literacy education, on the one hand, and leads possibly to students' inability to deal with sociopolitical issues they have to face in and outside of school, on the other hand.

Undeniably, it is challenging to help pre-service teachers, much less elementary students, to connect to the sociopolitical aspects of literacy education. To overcome the challenge, I share with the pre-service teachers children's books where sociopolitical issues are discussed. Children's books present difficult sociopolitical issues in a way that is comprehensible to adults as well as children while the significance of the issues presented in the books is not compromised. For example, Kim Huber documented how she helped her first graders explore a children's book and take action to change their community (Leland & Huber, 2015). Specifically, 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 to her students a children's book, *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997), where two children along with their mother help a homeless lady living outside in a box close to a warm air vent of a deli. 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, 2015, p. 70). *The Lady in the Box* is narrated from a boy's and a girl's perspectives and makes the homeless issue relatable to children. This example shows that children's books serve as a powerful tool to make sociopolitical issues relatable to educators and students who are new to critical literacy.

Taking Action

Finally, it is also challenging for the pre-service teachers to understand that critical literacy is action-oriented. Critical literacy is not simply an academic discipline to study, but serves to empower literacy learners to act as humans with agency – humans who have the potential for making positive change. This line of thinking, i.e., taking action to promote social justice, is aligned with Giroux and Giroux's (2004) view that knowledge "is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-

determination, individual autonomy, and social agency” (p. 84). A critical awareness of literacy education is still not critical literacy unless action is taken. Freire (1984) urges us to be actors instead of spectators. He argues that critical literacy/pedagogy should be a true praxis which consists of reflection as well as action. Therefore, action is inseparable from literacy education and is actually what makes it empowering. Literacy learners are empowered when what they learn in school is related to, and can be used to make an impact on, their daily lives.

To help the pre-service teachers understand that critical literacy should be manifested in both knowledge and action, I asked them to implement a critical literacy project with the elementary students during their practicum. The pre-service teachers were required to design a critical literacy project where the elementary students should take action to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of critical literacy. For example, two pre-service teachers were placed in a 4th-6th grade classroom in a local Montessori school for their practicum. After knowing about their students’ love for animals, but lack of knowledge about pet nutrition, the pre-service teachers created a critical literacy project where the elementary students had to do research and put together booklets on pet nutrition. In addition, the elementary students put their knowledge about pet nutrition into practice by making pet treats to be donated to a local animal shelter that held a weekly pet food drive for those in the community who might not be able to afford supplies for their animals. This example shows that the pre-service teachers and their students were able to act upon their knowledge to make a positive impact on their community.

Conclusion

In a world where literacies are socially constructed, presented in multimodalities, and intertwined with power relations, critical literacy is needed to help us evaluate a plethora of literacies, along with their social practices and power relations, in our daily lives. In this sense, critical literacy should be something we do every day as informed agents and, thus, become part of our lives. If critical literacy is what we encounter daily as human beings, it is important that it should be an important component of our literacy education as well. 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. This paper has shown how to introduce

pre-service teachers to critical literacy by clarifying “big words,” i.e., hard-to-understand terms/concepts, in critical literacy. By sharing my teaching experience, I hope that literacy educators and learners will find critical literacy accessible and important not only as an academic subject, but also as a way of life.

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