Wading through the Muddy Ground of Critical Thinking and Critical Literacy: Toward an Accessible Framework of Critical Literacy

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Abstract: This paper presents the differences between critical thinking and critical literacy as well as a pragmatic way to teach critical literacy through a children's book. First, the concepts of critical thinking and critical literacy are reviewed. Then, an example is provided to demonstrate how to help students distinguish critical thinking from critical literacy. Finally, the four dimensions of critical social practices are proposed as a framework to show how critical literacy can be implemented in a classroom through the use of children's literature.

Résumé : Cet article présente les différences entre la pensée critique et l'alphabétisation critique ainsi qu'une manière pragmatique d'enseigner l'alphabétisation critique à travers un livre pour enfants. Premièrement, les concepts de pensée critique et de culture critique sont passés en revue. Ensuite, un exemple est fourni pour démontrer comment aider les élèves à distinguer la pensée critique de la littératie critique. Enfin, les quatre dimensions des pratiques sociales critiques sont proposées comme cadre pour montrer comment l'alphabétisation critique peut être mise en œuvre dans une classe grâce à l'utilisation de la littérature pour enfants.

Introduction

As a teacher educator, I teach critical literacy as one of the main themes in literacy methods courses in a teacher preparation program at a university setting. I have to figure out whether the pre-service teachers' ability to understand and teach critical literacy improves after taking the literacy methods courses. Specifically, the pre-service teachers have to demonstrate their

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understanding of critical literacy in a paper to answer essay questions and, furthermore, implement a critical literacy lesson plan with their elementary students during the field experience. To accomplish this goal, I have inevitably found myself faced with two challenges. First, 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). This is probably because they have been exposed to Bloom's taxonomy in courses prior to my literacy methods courses. In Bloom's taxonomy, some types of learning require more cognitive processing than others. For example, 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 other challenge I have encountered is that most of the pre-service teachers are surprised to be introduced to critical literacy, a topic seldom brought up in a traditional literacy methods course in college. They are interested in critical literacy, but do not know how to implement it, especially with elementary students in the classrooms. Not surprisingly, the challenges I have are also shared by other teacher educators. For example, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) have 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) argues 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. In this paper, I will share how I address the two aforementioned challenges I have in teaching critical literacy. Specifically, I will first discuss the conceptions of critical thinking and critical literacy. Next, I will provide an example to demonstrate how I help the pre-service teachers distinguish critical thinking from critical

literacy. Finally, a practical framework will be proposed to show how critical literacy can be implemented in a classroom.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is not an unfamiliar term in education. In fact, it is included in academic standards as an important skill set that teachers have to help their students learn in K-12 settings. Colleges and universities also demand that their faculties instill critical thinking skills in students in a climate where disinformation is becoming more prevalent. According to Temple (2005), "[c]ritical thinking means that we carefully entertain arguments with which we are inclined to disagree, that we appraise the quality of their reasons and the logic with which the reasons are marshaled toward a conclusion" (p. 20). Critical thinking, however, is a highly debatable concept over which there is widespread disagreement (Burbules & Berk, 1999). One of the debates is concerned with whether critical thinking is a skill set or a disposition. In early literature on critical thinking, a critical thinker was regarded as someone who possessed the skills to identify invalid forms of argument and know how to make and defend claims (Ennis, 1980). Yet, more recently, this conception of critical thinking has been challenged as more scholars argue that critical thinking should include not only the skills, but also the disposition or drive to seek reasons and evidence (Ennis, 1996). For example, Scriven and Paul (2023) propose that critical thinking consists of a set of information and belief generating and processing skills as well as a habit of mind of being disposed to using those skills to guide behavior.

Another debate is whether critical thinking is considered generic or domain-specific skills and dispositions (Giselsson, 2020). This debate is characterized as a debate between generalists and specifists (Davies, 2013). For example, Willingham (2007) proposes that critical thinking is fundamentally intertwined with domain knowledge and, as such, appears to be highly content-specific and non-transferable across disciplines. In disagreement, Mulnix (2012) argues:

> There is a difference between having information at our disposal on the one hand, and knowing what to do with the information in order to reach reasonable and

> justified conclusions on the other hand. The former is domain knowledge; the latter is critical thinking. (p. 470)

In other words, the information we have at our disposal is only domain knowledge, which is important, but does not necessarily lead to critical thinking, which "requires an ability to grasp the evidential relations holding between types of statements" (Mulnix, 2012, p. 470).

A third debate has been proposed primarily by Paul (1990, 1994) and Elder (2007), who believe that a critical thinker is committed to overcoming the sway of egocentrism and sociocentrism. Therefore, thinking from the perspectives of others and being willing to engage in dialogue are relevant to the assessment of validity claims. Alternative points of view should be taken into consideration before a decision is made in order not to silence the voices of the parties at stake.

In summary, critical thinking can be regarded narrowly as a skill set or more broadly as a disposition. It can be extended to include skills/dispositions not limited to a specific domain or discipline. In this sense, critical thinking is considered a generic set of skills/dispositions applicable across various disciplines. Finally, egocentrism and sociocentrism should be avoided in critical thinking to allow different voices to be heard in the reasoning process. In light of the widespread disagreement among scholars about what critical thinking should be, it seems difficult to pin down critical thinking succinctly. Yet, Burbules (1993) argues that critical thinking is a function of collective questioning, criticism, and creativity. It is social in character because thinking in new ways usually arises from an interaction with challenging alternative views. Therefore, the unreconciled tension among scholars actually helps to keep the definition of critical thinking open to challenges and refined continuously.

Critical Literacy

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) even argues that the discussion of critical literacy should be elevated to the ontological level and that critical literacy as a way of being 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.

Critical Thinking versus Critical Literacy

Critical thinking and critical literacy are different concepts, but are often viewed as synonymous. Critical thinking focuses on thinking rationally or reasoning well and being able to give reasons to support the claim (Mulnix, 2012). While thinking rationally is also important to critical literacy, critical literacy is concerned more with "the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships" (Coffey, 2010, p. 1). 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 differs from critical thinking in that the former is set in a sociopolitical context oriented toward identifying unequal power relationships to promote social justice while the latter focuses on logical reasoning.

To illustrate the difference between critical thinking and critical literacy, I asked the pre-service teachers to read a magazine 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. For example, one of the pre-service teachers wrote the following in her analysis of the article:

> Beginning with the cartoon illustration which enhances the article, one can't help but notice the visual signs of the clichéd caricatures which convey the attitudes of the article's subjects. For example, the father is meant to look surprised and innocent as the mother figure angrily sneers at him while the son appears enthusiastic and focused on tennis. The father and son are dressed identically in tennis whites uniting them in sport as the mother is fashionably

> un-athletic looking in her tight tank top and jeans. Conspicuously absent is the daughter, Taylor, the twin of the boy. On the wall, there are three mirrors—a large masculine rectangle, a smaller masculine rectangle, and a feminine oval-shaped one. Again, there is no sign of an additional feminine oval representative of the other child, Taylor.

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, one should not be reduced to the other.

Four Dimensions of Critical Social Practices: Theory into Practice

While the above example serves to address the difference between critical thinking and critical literacy, a framework is needed to put critical literacy into practice systematically. This is where the four dimensions of critical social practice (FDCSP) come into play. The FDCSP is the backbone of the instructional model of critical literacy synthesized by Lewison, et al. (2015). The FDCSP is chosen for discussion because it is the result of a comprehensive review of research on critical literacy for a period of three decades. The FDCSP is not simply based on one single research study, but represents the studies done by many researchers and practitioners in different settings and times. In addition, The FDCSP clearly lays out the key features/dimensions of critical literacy that help set the stage for exploring what critical literacy can look like in practice. Therefore, the FDCSP is a theoretically-based framework that serves as guidelines for putting critical literacy into practice. However, it is important to note that the FDCSP is not claimed to be representative of all the theorizing about critical literacy, nor is it supposed to be inclusive of all the critical literacy practices. The FDCSP is a framework characteristic of the common features of critical literacy among a plethora of theoretical accounts and practitioner-authored narratives of critical literacy that have appeared in the academic and professional literature.

The FDCSP consists of four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action to promote social justice.

The first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, is to question 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, et al., 2015, p. 8). To paraphrase Luke (2013) and Luke and Freebody (1997, 1999), 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, 1999) 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 personal concerns and attempts to situate them in the sociopolitical contexts/systems (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999). The last dimension is taking action to promote social justice. It 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 and redefine unequal power relations and take action to transform their status quo. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, they are actually intertwined.

In what follows, I will use a children's book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (1992) to illustrate how to apply the FDCSP in analyzing a text. *The Giving Tree* features a story about a tree and a boy. The tree is personified and has a dialogue with the boy. The boy comes to the tree to eat her apples, swing from her branches, slide down her trunk…, and the tree is happy. As the boy grows older, he begins to want more from the tree. The tree lets him cut off her branches to build a house and even cut down her trunk to make a boat. Finally, the tree ends up with nothing but an old stump on which the boy can sit and rest. Yet, the tree is happy with all she has done for the boy. A children's book such as *The Giving Tree* is used to teach critical literacy because it appeals to a wide audience, focuses on a story, and is told with unforgettable language (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). It presents issues in a way to which readers can relate. Therefore, a children's book makes a difficult concept, i.e., critical literacy in this case, more manageable for the pre-service teachers to grasp. A children's book also offers a feasible

way for the pre-service teachers to introduce elementary students to an otherwise-difficult-to-understand concept or issue.

First Dimension: Disrupting the Commonplace

Disrupting the commonplace is questioning the norm, the routine, or what most of the people do or take for granted. It is "seeing the everyday through new lenses" (Lewison et al., 2002, pp. 382-383). A commonplace is a routine or even a bias that is practiced, but seldom questioned in our society. For example, *The Giving Tree* describes the friendship between a tree and a boy. While it is important to treat a friend nicely and generously, the boy in the book seems to take advantage of the tree by asking her for more and more until nothing but the stump is left. Therefore, *The Giving Tree* disrupts or problematizes the common notion of a relationship between friends by presenting a "special" kind of friendship between the tree and the boy. After reading the book, we might come away from the story, reflecting on to what extent we should treat our friends to show our kindness to them on the one hand, and not to be exploited by them on the other hand. Therefore, the book helps us disrupt the commonplace we have about friendship and reflect critically on what it should look like.

Second Dimension: Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Interrogating multiple viewpoints emphasizes the importance of looking into an issue from multiple perspectives in order to have a better understanding of the issue. In *The Giving Tree*, for example, the "friendship" issue is examined from different perspectives. The thoughts and feelings of both the tree and the boy are presented. The book shows the perspective and voice of the tree. The tree is always happy to offer something to the boy regardless of the outcome for herself. This viewpoint makes us curious about why the tree always gives even to her own detriment. Additionally, the book also presents the boy's perspective and voice. We may wonder why the boy always goes to the tree for help and why he does not figure out the problem for himself. Does the boy take the easy route by going to the tree and getting what he needs instead of working hard for it? An examination of the perspectives of the tree and the boy will give us a better understanding of what friendship should look like.

Third Dimension: Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

Focusing on sociopolitical issues is going beyond the personal and attempting to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. *The Giving Tree*, on the surface, depicts a personal story between a tree and a boy. However, through a careful examination of the story, we can step beyond the perspectives of the tree and the boy and explore their sociopolitical implications in relation to us. For example, the friendship between the tree and the boy has turned into an unhealthy relationship where the boy constantly takes advantage of the kindness and generosity of the tree at the cost of even the tree's life. By situating this issue in a broader sociopolitical context, we can explore how the story relates to us or the people around us. One possible sociopolitical issue is how we can prevent friendship from becoming a bullying experience where one party, knowingly or not, exploits the other. This is one of several personal as well as sociopolitical issues that students at all levels are likely to encounter and can be guided to discuss after reading the book.

Fourth Dimension: Taking Action to Promote Social Justice

Critical literacy is not simply a topic of conversation, but serves to empower literacy learners to act as people with agency – people 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 and argues that critical literacy/pedagogy should be a true praxis which consists of reflection as well as action.

The reading of *The Giving Tree* can lead to several possible actions. For example, in the context of an elementary school, teachers can encourage their elementary students to discuss what friendship should be like. The elementary students can be guided to brainstorm a list of things they should and should not do to their friends, reflect on how they have treated their friends, and take action to make changes if they have not treated their friends properly.

The above example shows that the FDCSP provides a feasible and systematic way for those who are interested in implementing critical literacy. In addition, the use of a children's book makes

critical literacy accessible to not only adults, but also children who can explore a complex issue presented in a kid-friendly way in the book. To see more examples of how to put the FDCSP into practice, interested readers can refer to works, for example, by Law (2020), Lewison et al. (2015), and Van Sluys (2005) where critical literacy is taught through the use of children's books.

Conclusion

This paper presents the differences between critical thinking and critical literacy as well as a pragmatic way to teach critical literacy through a children's book. It argues that critical thinking differs from critical literacy in that the former focuses on logic and reasoning while the latter focuses on identifying and investigating the power relationships in literacy practices. In a world where multiple forms of literacy are prevalent in our daily lives, the ability to practice critical literacy in examining texts critically becomes indispensable. Therefore, the instruction of critical literacy is much needed as it relates to what we do every day in relation to literacy. Not teaching critical literacy, in fact, ignores an important aspect of literacy education we can hardly afford to do without.

Undeniably, it is challenging to implement critical literacy in the classroom, especially for those who are still learning about, and have little experience with, critical literacy. This paper proposes that using the FDCSP along with a children's book is a viable way to teach critical literacy. Specifically, critical literacy in the form of the FDCSP (i.e., disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice) can be taught systematically. In addition, the use of a children's book *The Giving Tree*, for example, makes the friendship issue among others relatable to children. In this way, the children are invited not only to examine the friendship issue critically, but also to take action to change how they should treat, or be treated by, their friends. I hope that this paper will serve as an invitation to all literacy educators/practitioners to put critical literacy into practice in their classrooms.

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