

From Disrupting the Commonplace to Taking Action in Literacy Education

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Introduction

I have been teaching a literacy/language arts methods course to pre-service teachers in a teacher education program at a Midwestern university in the United States for years. One of my favorite questions for my pre-service teachers in the beginning of the semester was: “What are language arts?” With a couple of prompts, most of the pre-service teachers were able to figure out two of them: reading and writing. These two arts or literacy skills are tested most often in schools. This is probably why they had no problem getting them right. With a few more cues, they added speaking and listening to the list. While they were quite satisfied, I reminded them that there were at least two more language arts according to the definition of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (Tompkins, 2009). This time, despite my numerous hints, they had no clue, and I had to tell them that viewing and visually representing were also considered language arts.

We then had a discussion of how these six language arts were not clear-cut categories and how one was interconnected with others. For example, when we are reading, we are not simply reading but doing something else. We may also be visually representing pictures in our mind when reading a travel book. Or we may jot down notes on what we are reading. The pre-service teachers were usually surprised to learn that what appeared to be distinct categories of literacy skills turn out to overlap with each other. Once they were aware of the interrelationship of

literacy skills, I invited them to think about what this implied for their teaching of literacy. Questions for them to consider were: “Can reading be taught as if it is a skill that can be isolated from other literacy skills? What is being literate? Does it mean the ability to read and write? What about people who cannot read or write well but are great artists? Are they literate?” By the time I asked them what we meant by being critically literate, they were generally overwhelmed and looked at me for answers. At this point, I was satisfied, not because I was finished with my questions (actually this was just the beginning of the course), but because I had problematized what they usually took for granted. This step, I believe, is very important because if we do not challenge what we have already known, it is dangerous. According to Harste (2008), it can even become an act of terrorism:

We often extol certainty as a good thing and associate it with action, with decisiveness, with getting things done. And indeed it can be a source of action. It takes a very certain individual to mandate a particular reading program for everyone, to fly a plane into the World Trade Center, to organize a school shooting. We don't call all these acts of terrorism, but we should. Extremes are natural products of certitude. If I am absolutely certain I am right, then it will appear to me that I am justified in anything I do. (p. 35)

Problematizing what my students believed about literacy education is what Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) call “disrupting the commonplace,” the very first dimension of the “four dimensions” framework of critical literacy practice.

Theoretical Framework: Four Dimensions Framework of Critical Literacy Practice

In line with critical literacists such as Paulo Freire (1972, 1984), Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren (1993), and Barbara Comber and Anne Simpson (2001), Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) argue that literacy education should not be limited to simply reading and writing. Instead, it should be situated in a sociopolitical context where literacy is examined critically. To put this critical view into practice, Lewison et al. propose a four dimensions framework that consists of (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) considering multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on the sociopolitical, and (d) taking action. Their framework provides guidelines whereby critical literacy practice can be carried out.

The first dimension of Lewison et al.'s framework, disrupting the common place, involves problematizing all subjects of study (Shor, 1987) and including “risky texts” as a regular part of the curriculum to assure

“good literature discussions” (Harste, 2008, p. 72). The second dimension invites us to reflect on multiple and contradictory perspectives and to pay attention to the voices of those who have been marginalized (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000). Central to the third dimension is to acknowledge the fact that “everyday politics, sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from teaching and learning” (Van Sluys, 2005, p. 17). Finally, the fourth dimension is concerned with taking action or engaging in praxis—reflection and action in Freire’s (1984) language—to transform the world and achieve social justice. I have used Lewison et al.’s framework to teach the literacy/language arts methods course. It is something I hope my pre-service teachers will apply in their future classrooms. I would also like to use these four dimensions as an outline for this article in discussing how I have introduced this framework along with its corresponding curricular engagements to my pre-service teachers in my literacy/language arts methods course.¹ This article shows that the four dimensions framework offers a viable approach to helping pre-service teachers understand and implement critical literacy in the classrooms.

Disrupting the Commonplace

The majority of the pre-service teachers I have worked with think that teaching literacy/language arts is concerned mainly with teaching skills and strategies. That is, literacy is simply skills to be mastered through strategies. Teachers are supposed to teach students best strategies to learn such skills as reading and writing. From this perspective, literacy is usually considered neutral, and literacy instruction is reduced to the search for best strategies to learn isolated skills. There are at least three problems with this reductionist perspective on literacy education.

First, critical literacists have showed that literacy can be used to present information in a way to advantage one group against another. For example, Gee (cited in Leland & Harste, 2008) argues that the label on an aspirin bottle seems to convey two distinct voices:

[O]ne voice sounds like an experienced lawyer who is poised to protect the company if consumers decide to use the product in an unauthorized way and end up hurting themselves or their children as a result.... [The second voice, however,] sounds friendlier and seems to be reassuring consumers that aspirin is no more dangerous than other over-the-counter medications. (p. 75)

In this example, the label puts the pharmaceutical company that produces the aspirin in a favorable position against the consumers who have to read the instructions carefully or are responsible for any possible

consequences. Therefore, the representation of literacy is not neutral but serves a purpose.

Second, teaching literacy without questioning its underlying claims runs the risk of perpetuating dominant ideologies (Freitas & McAuley, 2008; McIntyre, 1997). Specifically, if literacy is assumed to be apolitical, literacy education is then focused on passing mechanical skills on to students. However, students do not only learn the skills, but they are also likely to take the embedded ideologies for granted. In this sense, literacy education may not be empowering but victimizing the students (Campano, 2008). Of course, I am in no doubt that a teacher who can teach a student to read without necessarily making the ideologies of texts apparent is still “empowering” students beyond those students who cannot read. However, at the same time, I also believe that without helping students recognize the ideologies of texts, teachers do not fully develop the literacies of the students they teach.

Third, the reductionist view assumes that there are best strategies to teach or learn literacy. The belief or myth that there exist best strategies has haunted educational researchers and practitioners for a long time. The search for best strategies usually leads to debate and division among educators who hold on to different beliefs. In another article (Lee, 2011), I argue that best strategies cannot be found by looking for the best among various practices. Instead, they entail a topsy-turvy look at what they are and a critical examination of our underlying beliefs about them. Specifically, the search for best strategies calls for a paradigm shift from objectivism to praxis theory. Objectivism is based on “the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework [e.g., the existence of best strategies in this case] to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 8).

In contrast, praxis theory argues that the search for best strategies, as a dialectical process between literacy teachers and learners, takes into account the fact that learners are co-inquirers who are capable of doing independent research through appropriate guidance and that they are able to find best strategies if they are respected as competent participants in a mutual learning process and community. In other words, “best strategies” are not identified through a search for strategies, because they depend on such variables as teachers, students, contents, contexts, etc., but through a change in one’s philosophy about literacy education so that teachers are not authoritative knowledge transmitters but co-inquirers in a democratic learning environment.

Consequently, disrupting pre-service teachers’ reductionist view on literacy education is imperative, as it broadens the definition and scope

of literacy education and avoids the risk of passing dominant ideologies on to students. Disrupting the commonplace is the first dimension of the framework that also paves the way for the subsequent three dimensions of examining literacy critically. Yet it is also a recurring process that can happen at any point within the framework. To disrupt pre-service teachers' belief about literacy education, I challenged them with the questions I mentioned at the beginning of this article. I also invited them to examine the literature in their daily lives, which includes TV commercials, newspaper advertisements, labels, etc. They became more explicitly aware that many issues embedded in these media were stereotyped and left unquestioned. For example, one student pointed out that gender stereotypes (i.e., boys are meant for sports while girls are not) were implicit in the text and illustrations of a magazine article she read. Here is an excerpt of her critical 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, 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.

Through this exercise, the student began to understand that texts are not neutral. Actually, she identified and problematized, for example, the gender stereotype that men are supposed to be more athletic than women, while in reality there are numerous successful female athletes. What she did is disrupting of the commonplace by asking how the text is trying to position men and women in a biased way—the very first dimension of critical literacy practice.

Considering Multiple Viewpoints

Considering multiple viewpoints invites us to examine issues through lenses that are different from what we are used to. It complicates what we already know (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argue that investigating multiple viewpoints “can enable us to frame agendas and strategies that will do justice to a broader range of people and avoid oversimplifying human experience” (p. 55). To help my

students see issues from multiple perspectives, I designed an activity called "My Papa's Waltz." My Papa's Waltz is a well-known poem written by Theodore Roethke (see Appendix A). I chose this poem for the activity because it is an ambiguous poem that can be interpreted differently. In fact, Theodore Roethke intentionally made this poem hazy when he was composing it. He interlaced his poem with words that carried positive and negative connotations. The poem was ideal for the activity because the purpose of the activity was to engage my students to interpret the text from multiple perspectives.

To begin with, each pre-service teacher was given a copy of the poem along with five questions (see Appendix A). I invited a female and then a male pre-service teacher to read the poem out loud to the class. Having different people, especially people of different genders, read the poem could sometimes arouse different feelings or interpretations among the listeners. Before the class shared their interpretations of the poem, I asked them whether the poem was sad or joyful. Usually, the majority of the class thought it was sad while only a few thought it was joyful. Sometimes, about two or three students (out of approximately twenty-five) were torn between the two. I invited those who said that it was a sad poem to explain why it was so. Most of them linked their negative feelings to words such as "whisky," "death," and "beat" used in the poem. They associated the poem with a scene where a drunken father was abusing his child. Then we listened to those who thought that it was a joyful poem. They said it was playful. The father might have had a little wine, but he was not drunk. "My father sometimes has beer to unwind himself," said one of the pre-service teachers, "and it is all right." After both "sad" and "joyful" groups had their say, the "undecided" group usually expressed sympathy with either of the other two groups.

After all the comments were heard, I asked the pre-service teachers again what they thought about the poem. This time, I usually had a few converts from the "sad" group to either the "joyful" group or to the "undecided" group. I reminded them that they were reading the same poem, yet they had multiple interpretations. While they were surprised at how people could react so differently to the same poem, they were also curious about what the author wanted to express through the poem and asked me if I knew the "correct" answer. In response, I asked them, "Does it matter?" "Do you as readers have the right to interpret the poem differently than the author?" I continued. Not surprisingly, most of them were either silent or hesitant to respond to my questions. Yet I was pleased when a few of them were murmuring softly, "Yes" or "I guess so." I echoed their brave attempts by sharing Rosenblatt's (1978, 2005) view on reading as a meaning-making process through readers' transactions with texts.

Specifically, Rosenblatt believes that trying to find out the author's ideas may be important, yet it should not consist of the entire process of reading. The readers certainly have the right to respond to the text differently due to, for example, their diverse life experiences. Through this activity, my students' eyes were opened to a new way of interpreting texts, and they also learned to view texts from multiple perspectives.

Reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives is essential for making difference visible. In this case, my students became aware that different interpretations could be made on the same poem and that different voices should be respected. They also understood the importance of using multiple voices to interrogate texts by asking whose voices are heard and whose are missing (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Looking at texts lopsidedly runs the risk of silencing or marginalizing other voices.

Focusing on the Sociopolitical

Why is it essential to link literacy education to a sociopolitical dimension? To answer this question, one must revisit the nature of literacy and how it is constructed, which were discussed previously in this article. Briefly, recall that literacy is not neutral and is usually socially and politically constructed to achieve certain agendas. It can even be used to privilege one group against another. For example, looking at the American Civil War with an exclusive focus on how the Confederate States of America (the Confederacy) fought for independence is a skewed presentation of the overall picture. It is not set in a sociopolitical context where there were differential views between the Confederacy and the Union on such issues as slavery and nationalism. Therefore, literacy education situated outside of a sociopolitical context is unauthentic and misleading. In addition, the focus on the sociopolitical dimension is what separates "critical literacy (or literacies)" from "critical thinking." According to Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008), "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).

It is important to address the sociopolitical aspects of literacy education. However, if the pre-service teachers find it irrelevant, they are not motivated to do so. Therefore, a connection has to be made between their personal concerns and the sociopolitical dimension of literacy education. To achieve this goal, students were given articles (e.g., Dessoff, 2007; Goodman, 2006) to read on the pros and cons of a reading assessment, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). Administered in most of the 50 states in the United States, DIBELS is a standardized assessment

created by Ruth Kaminski and Roland Good (Kaminski & Good, 2009) for elementary school students, especially kindergarten through 3rd grade. It evaluates five areas of reading, i.e., phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, identified by the National Reading Panel (University of Oregon, 2010).

Students are allowed only one minute to finish the test for each area, and their scores depend primarily on how fast and accurately they do on the test. Reading articles on DIBELS was closely tied to the pre-service teachers' concerns or interests as they were very likely to use the assessment in their future classrooms. The readings also brought the political controversies about DIBELS to their attention. Quite a few of them commented in their reflection papers that they never heard about DIBELS before reading the articles. Many were astounded to know that educators had such opposite views on DIBELS. In their paper, I asked them to link what they learned from the articles to their future teaching of literacy. While the majority of them understood that the skills assessed by DIBELS did play a part in supporting the development of literacy in young or developing learners, they were also aware that it was a limited assessment tool for understanding the literacy levels of students. Some of them said that they did not like DIBELS but probably had to do it because it was mandated. Yet they added that they would, at the same time, use supplementary assessments to better evaluate their students' reading competence.

Through the reading of articles that made explicit the controversies of a widely adopted literacy practice (i.e., DIBELS in this case), the pre-service teachers understood that education is not apolitical. They became cognizant that even the simple acts of choosing what books for students to read, what topics to cover in a course, and what tests to assess students with are already political in nature and that critical literacy has a close relevance to their instructional practices.

Taking Action

A critical awareness of literacy education is still not critical literacy unless action is taken. Freire (1984) urges us to be actors instead of speculators and argues that critical literacy/pedagogy should be a true praxis which consists of reflection as well as action. However, what does action mean? This was a question my students asked most frequently. Does it mean that literacy educators and learners should become social and political activists? This is actually quite a daunting idea to even think about as most of the pre-service teachers believe that they are educators and should not be involved in social and political movements.

While taking an activist role to strive for social justice is not necessarily excluded from critical literacy practices, it is not a must or the only way. Action can encompass “reading resistantly, communicating new lines of thinking, and pushing others to question how they come to see the world” (Van Sluys, 2005, pp. 22-23). In other words, if my students are able to read texts critically by problematizing their underlying assumptions and examining them from multiple perspectives, they have already taken action – a change in their reading habit. This is not merely a skill to master but an attitude toward, and a transaction with, texts and the world around them. The goal is to use literacy to transform the world and achieve social justice (Van Sluys, 2005). It is also something I hope my pre-service teachers can pass on to their students.

The pre-service teachers in my literacy/language arts methods course completed 70 hours of field experience as part of their course requirement. This field experience gave them an opportunity to take action, that is, to implement critical literacy with elementary school students. They had to design an instructional literacy unit called “a critical invitation,” which is consistent with the philosophy of critical literacy. Critical invitations are built on Carolyn Burke’s concept of “invitations” first introduced in a graduate seminar in 1981 and then extended by Van Sluys (2005), who puts forth four common features of invitations: “an initial experience, a formally presented invitation, possible questions to pursue, and related resources” (p. 30). Specifically, initial experiences connect invitations to students’ personal interests and situate them within social contexts. Invitations formally invite students as decision makers to participate in literacy inquiries. The questions indicate possible directions for students to explore issues within social contexts. Related resources provide scaffolding for rich inquiries.

An invitation that fleshes out the four features designed and implemented by one of my students is included in Appendix B. It is an invitation to consider the U.S. Census, which is explored from multiple viewpoints that focus on the sociopolitical issues. In what follows, an excerpt of this student’s reflection on her implementation of the invitation is presented:

Wednesday as I was driving home, I was struck by how much I enjoy this method of teaching. Instead of being the supplier of all the answers, or even claiming to know all of the answers, I find it much more stimulating for students to personally connect with what they are learning. I believe that when students uncover their own meaning and self-direct their learning, it is extremely valuable and relevant to them. I hope that my students have found the value in thinking critically and pursuing self-generated questions through this critical invitation.

Through the implementation of the critical invitation, this pre-service teacher broadened her perspective on, and understanding of, literacy education. She switched her view of educators as knowledge suppliers to co-inquirers with students. For her, literacy education was no longer a transmission of isolated skills but a critical meaning-making process through self-directed inquiries.

Final Note

This article presented how the four dimensions framework of critical literacy practice can be implemented with pre-service teachers in a literacy/language arts methods course. It discussed what each of the four dimensions is and how they can be put into practice through various classroom engagements. Though the four dimensions were introduced in a linear way, one dimension does not necessarily have to precede another. For example, the first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, can occur simultaneously with the third dimension, focusing on the sociopolitical. In addition, if one hesitates about implementing all of the four dimensions, he/she can certainly pick and choose and do what can be done with the time and resources given. The four dimensions framework is helpful for educators to put theory into manageable practice.

Freire (1984) suggests that education is either indoctrinating or liberating, and we choose which way we will teach. I agree with Freire that in literacy education, there is no neutral ground. If we do not stand up to advocate an empowering or liberating pedagogy, we are doing the opposite. Our silence does not exempt us from, but makes us become complicit in, the perpetuation of unequal social practices. Fortunately, literacy educators do have a choice. I have made my choice to be a critical literacy teacher educator. My experience documented in this article, I hope, will serve as an invitation for more literacy educators to join the critical literacy community.

Note

¹ While critical literacy is the focus of the literacy/language arts methods course I teach, the content knowledge of, for example, reading and writing, which pre-service teachers need to know to be prepared for their future career also consists of a considerable part of the course. This article only presents the part of the course that is related to critical literacy.

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Appendix A

My Papa's Waltz

By Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Questions

Is the poem a sad or joyful poem? Why?

Read the poem more than once. Did you feel the same each time you read it?

Have you ever watched the same movie more than once and had different feelings about it? Or have you ever visited the same place more than once and felt differently each time you visited it? Why?

We as teachers usually want our students to read “good” books. Try to define what we mean by “good” books.

Play with the following terms and see if you can find any relationships among them.

- ◆ Reader
- ◆ Text
- ◆ Author
- ◆ Interpretations

Appendix B

Critical Invitation: The 2010 Census

An Initial Experience

Recently, our country has been inundated with commercials and news reports about the 2010 United States Census. Does this sound familiar? “We can’t move forward until you mail it back!” It is important to think critically about this flood of information in order to understand the census and how it affects you, your community, your state, and your country.

A Formally Presented Invitation

You’re invited to use a variety of resources to find out about the 2010 U.S. Census and explore questions that you find intriguing. You can find websites on my Portaportal. Below is a list of books that you can use to investigate this topic. Inside this folder, you will find a copy of a real census form, a newsletter created by the U.S. Census Bureau that was sent home with many students around our nation, and brochures that talk about temporary census jobs.

Possible Questions to Pursue

Use these resources to help you answer questions you may have about the census such as:

- ◆ Why does our country take a census every ten years?
- ◆ Who would not be likely to fill out a census form and mail it back?
- ◆ Why does the U.S. Census Bureau spend so much money on advertising?
- ◆ In the past, how did our country count people for the census? Did everyone get counted, or were some people left out on purpose?

Related Resources

Available Book Resources:

- ◆ *Counting Heads and More: The Works of the U.S. Census Bureau* by Marta McCave
- ◆ *Atlas of American History* published by Rand McNally
- ◆ *Children of the Wild West* by Russell Freedman
- ◆ *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold
- ◆ *Environmental Atlas of the United States* by Mark Mattson
- ◆ *Immigrant Kids* by Russell Freedman
- ◆ *If Your Name was Changed at Ellis Island* by Ellen Levine