

## **Linking Words and Worlds through Curriculum Integration**

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In literacy programs, the subject of Social Studies is not always present. At least it is not foregrounded. When it appears, it does so in a secondary way, without its critical properties. In fact, this subject is frequently reduced to dimensions of little value in knowing and understanding reality. It is common to see Social Studies taught as the memorization of dates, names, places, and heroes. This teaching that places value on what one memorizes may even lead to a student earning good grades in school, but it certainly does not lead to one doing well in life, applying what he/she learned to real life situations (Gee, 2003). Social Studies as a mere collection of facts does not allow students to understand the complex relations present in society. But this is the way traditional Social Studies have been taught—assessing the memory of students and their ability to recall names and facts as opposed to assessing their analytical intelligence. Making connections in teaching words through the teaching and understanding of the world makes literacy teaching more complex and interesting.

In a program called *Literacy for Social Inclusion*, taking place in rural communities of Northeastern Brazil, educators are trying to expand and deepen the concept that the subject of Social Studies can have a very important role in the development of one's literacy. This program proposes that school, being a social space, should open its doors to the discussion of the reality of its students, starting with the experiences students bring with them into the classroom. It is then, in sharing their experiences, that alternative possibilities of intervention, of applying the word to change

the world, are created. This program, based on Paulo Freire's pedagogy (1970), proposes that teaching should encompass the reality students bring to the classroom, as they have lived and experienced it, as a basis for the learning and discussion of other realities. It seeks to foster the awareness that students already know much as they enter the literacy classroom—fostering a meta-awareness or *conscientização* (Freire, 1970). Learners gain an awareness of the things they know but were not aware they knew and gain critical knowledge of what they don't know (this goes for the teacher as well). Finally, the program proposes that students and teachers engage in social change, in the transformation of society.

### **Participatory Approach**

The Freirean approach, also called participatory, learner-centered, or liberatory education, revolves around the discussion of issues that are pertinent to the students, part of their real-life experiences. The concept is that education and knowledge have value only if they help people free themselves from oppressive social conditions. To understand the Freirean approach, it is important to understand the definitions of three phrases: (1) generative words and themes, (2) collaboration and dialogue among equals, and (3) problem posing. Generative words and themes are the basis for the conversation, reading, and writing activities. Students start with encoding and decoding exercises and move to more complex activities. Collaboration and dialogue among equals is the concept that teaching takes place in a culture circle, where teachers and students face one another and discuss issues that are relevant to them and their lives. Problem posing is describing objects, pictures, and written text that are seen by the teacher and students. Students examine the relationship between themselves and the object as well as what they feel about what they see; they also articulate the problem illustrated and propose solutions (Peyton & Crandall, 1995). This approach works with themes and words that are important to the lives of the learners. Further, it extends the themes and activities being studied into action, so that the learner's lives can be improved.

The participatory approach is learner-centered, because what will be learned and the use of what will be learned are determined through ongoing negotiation between teachers and students. This takes place through dialogue and is the very reason that dialogue is so important to the Freirean approach to teaching literacy. However, Freire's theory does not stop with the fact that it is learner-centered. More important than that is the fact that his theory advocates literacy as a venue for social change and personal transformation.

### **Literacy for Social Inclusion**

This program proposes that students engage in constructing the system that represents the written language. Learning is therefore a constructive process in which the individual, through hypotheses constructed from what one already knows, confronts his/her hypotheses with reality, and rethinks them according to this experience. The pedagogy of this program encompasses reading and writing as processes of constructing meaning and learning as a consequence of the learner's action over his/her reality. It is important to note that in any pedagogy, even in the most apparently simple, there is a justification for its creation, implementation and goals, even if not explicit. No practice is neutral. While this is true, the pedagogy of this program differs from others as it shows coherence between its theory and practice, which is only possible through the constant reflection of the action in which students and teachers engage inside and out of the classroom.

The process of acquiring literacy is not simply learning how to read the word, to decode written words, or simply to mechanically organize mathematic algorithms. There ought to be a reading, an interpretation of the world each student brings, from his/her own life, culture, life experiences, and the relations in which one engages daily. All of these come before one's access to the written word. The students' lives and previous experiences, their cultural capital (Foucault, 1978), need to be considered up front so that the specific words being learned in the classroom reflect the lives of the students and who they are as well as what they do.

In this way, it is necessary to get past, at least to a certain extent, some ideas traditionally incorporated in Social Studies, such as the memorization of unrelated facts. It is important to introduce to the subject tools that will permit the literacy learner to comprehend and uncover the relations in which he/she is socially involved. Joining literacy and the critical teaching of Social Studies, therefore, offers the student the tools to not only understand his/her place in society and the systems of that society, but to try to take action to improve his/her conditions. In this way, the word taught in the classroom transcends the classroom walls and applies to the worlds of the learners, allowing them to engage in social change.

It is important to understand that the society in which we live is not a conglomeration of equal people, nor is it the mathematical sum of its components. If this were the way to understand a society, its systems, and the individuals who are part of it, we would not need Social Sciences but a machine to calculate all the similar individuals making up our society. In reality, though, our society is very complex and its individuals are different on many grounds. A society is fundamentally

the relationship that individuals, groups, and classes negotiate and enact amongst themselves. These happen in many places: within the family, school, church, work, leisure, etc.

Understanding one's work (its relationships, organization, products, goods, supply and demand rules, etc.) can provide a key to unlock the understanding of society. This is due to the fact that by understanding their work situations, students will have to learn who controls the means of social production, how goods are produced, who produces them, and who appropriates them. If we start teaching literacy with these broader perspectives, we will go beyond the appearance of facts to penetrate and understand their inner workings. By doing so, we will be opening paths to a better understanding of the world in which we live, thereby transforming the literacy process into critical engagement for social change, linking the word and the world.

### **Redefining Educators**

Educators must leave aside the traditional definitions of teacher as owner/depositor of knowledge, and student as receptacle of knowledge, as this banking system of education has proven quite ineffective (Freire, 1970). Teachers must understand how their students learn, so that they will be better able to elaborate and offer meaningful situations in which the learning of oral and written language takes place. Any activity of reading and writing will have to start from what the student already knows, and not of what he/she ignores. Auerbach (1992) wrote about the importance of social context as a resource that informs literacy development. She stated that if teachers have a broad definition of literacy and include a broad range of activities and practices that are part of the students' everyday lives, social context becomes a rich resource that can give information instead of stopping the learning process.

Blurring the line that delineates and separates the roles of students and teachers, educators in this program must look at students as constructing their own knowledge, in fact as co-constructing their own knowledge (Ochs & Capps, 2001) through narrating their life experiences while making sense of them through critical eyes. In this process of co-construction of knowledge, adults in the *Literacy for Social Inclusion* program start from what they know, as upon entering school they already have a very particular understanding of reading and writing and of their roles in the world. Each learner has already devised a way to deal with the literate society in which they live. In this process of co-construction of knowledge, students start by co-telling their stories, then proceed to producing their symbolic representation. This symbolic representation

may start with hard to read lines drawn on a paper, which at that point can only be read by the author him/herself. Students then progress as they understand letters as representing sounds in a word. Finally, they represent spoken words as words written on a paper, going through the phonemic, syllabic, and finally the alphabetic representation.

### **Teaching Situated Literacy**

The process of becoming literate does not restrict itself to the learning of reading and writing. While reading and writing words, sentences, and decontextualized texts is part of it, so is the reading of the reality, the reading of the space and actions of people. Whether or not we want to or know how to engage in the reading of the world, the need to understand the world is imperative to best lead one's life. One of the key points in the teaching of the world is to understand social relationships, so as to better intervene and modify them. We must, therefore, prepare literacy classes, not as the teaching of the word per se, but the reading of the word in relationship to the world.

In starting to teach literacy informed by Social Studies, this program in Northeastern Brazil begins by approaching Social Studies as the history of human beings. This more concrete approach allows students to situate and understand themselves as historical beings. From this understanding, they start unveiling social relationships in the world and gain critical understanding of history as it relates to international influences on work relations.

### **First Lesson, Learners as Historical Beings**

Here, I discuss the first days of implementing the literary program. While I was a participant, observing a classroom of adults, the elementary school teacher in me saw how these concepts may apply to elementary students as well. While "[i]t is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them" (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998, p.xi), I want to invite you to read what they propose and try to recreate and re-write the ideas discussed for your own teaching situation or context.

One objective of the program is to allow the worker-student to enter the reading and writing world. He/she must also grasp the reading of the time and language, or discourse (Gee, 1996) of spaces, through which he/she has passed. It is important to value the many forms of expressing the experiences and lives of students. Teachers must include these in the teaching and learning of reading and writing to better enable the understanding and construction of each learner's life in society. The

student must understand that the human being is a result of natural and cultural evolution and is transformed in turn as he/she transforms nature and society (Núcleo de Ensino, Pesquisa e Extensão em Educação de Jovens e Adultos, 1999).

In investigating the origin of human beings, students are invited to explore and understand that physical appearance and cultural manifestations are not fixed, but only a stage of one's historical evolution. In the first class of this unit, students and teacher explore the origin of human beings in terms of who they are and what their future is. In the context of this program, Social Studies must address the natural curiosity of the human being—to know himself/herself and the world in which he/she lives. Further, it must as a result of the co-construction of this knowledge, allow individuals to better understand the world in which they live as well as their role in this world. The combination of Social Sciences with the teaching of literacy therefore fosters a formation of a socially aware individual, who acquires the word as a tool to understand and promote social change in the world according to one's needs and beliefs.

To understand the world in which we live, we must keep in mind that we jointly construct that world. Each one of us is a key piece of the puzzle. Without one's participation in the world, it would not be what it is; with our participation, the world can become a better place. Since history per se, as traditionally taught, displays many removed and abstract concepts, *Literacy for Social Inclusion* initiates the teaching of Social Studies and literacy through the theme "learning about me through the other."

The premise of coupling these two areas is seen in action in the classroom on the first day of classes. The teacher tells students that each one of them has a history. The idea is that each of us was born, grew, played, worked, fought, loved, and one day will die. Even though each has a life and lives in familiar places, the history of each of us is different. That said, the teacher invites students to engage in oral practice by telling them that in life, each has different experiences and different lives as historical agents. With that, the teacher invites each learner to turn to the person next to them and tell their life history. Subsequently, they will tell the class the life story they learned from the other.

Following these introductions, students orally co-construct their life narratives and the reporting of these narratives to the class. Each individual is then invited to represent the important facts of their lives by drawing a cartoon-like strip. After finishing the construction of the cartoon strip, groups are formed and each author shares the strip as he/she orally tells the group what the drawings represent. This allows students to explore what they know and share their knowledge without being restricted by their limited literacy skills. Yet, it allows them to

realize that one could only fully understand the cartoon with their narration. The need for language, whether oral or written, is foregrounded.

Together they choose an event in the lives of each participant to represent as a mimed skit in the classroom. The class has to try to reconstruct the narrative, by attaching words to the actions being represented and trying to guess whose story it is. The knowledge of the structure of a narrative is revealed when they try to construct a linear story (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Then the author of the story tells his or her own narration of the story and the class discusses the similarities and differences between narratives constructed by each author through the drawing compared to narratives constructed through the class skit. The perspective of different versions of the same event is then critically analyzed.

Another realization arises through the discussion of how each learner has different histories, although most of them grew up in the same town. Together they try to construct a collective story, finding it very difficult, as there are so many different events, even though they are part of the same community and have much in common. Leaving this problem to be discussed later, the discussion turns towards the similarities and differences in the lives of each of them. Also, they start discussing the intrinsic relations to the history of the others in the classroom.

The group goes on to discuss what it is to be a human being. As they come up with words, the teacher draws a web on the board and lists every word as it is said. As words are said, they are read aloud in chorus. They end the first meeting by writing a couple of sentences with much scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) provided by the teacher. Basic sentence structures are provided on the board and possible words for filling in the blank are also listed as generated by the students in defining human beings. The sentences are: My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am \_\_\_\_\_. They leave excited (smiles beaming from their faces) and talking about how they were already writing on the first day of class. That sense of accomplishment is, according to the teacher, the indication that they will come back to the second class. The motivation to attend classes is of paramount importance, especially considering attendance in this program is not mandatory. They told me they could hardly wait to do their homework—to learn the story of their names by asking a family member how their names were chosen and how their surnames came about. The teacher suggests they bring their birth certificates. Information about the acquisition of a birth certificate is provided to those who never had one. The first step towards understanding one's history is taken.

Following this class, students discuss the uniqueness of their names and of themselves. They start to touch on historical concepts such as the construction of history, mathematical concepts such as chronology (pas-

sage of time) and the writing of numbers. Language is learned accordingly, via the symbolic representation of oral language through writing. Through the word, they start to have an understanding of their worlds. In the first unit of study, topics such as uncovering my history, what I am, my image, discussing our origins, our origins as told by other people, and I am a historical subject, are discussed. Along the way, reading and writing skills are taught. As Freire stated,

a critical reading of the world is intimately related to a historical and cultural reading of the world. Such a reading allows us to make linkages and comparisons, arrive at conclusions, and speak in relation to the world both theoretically and practically. In doing so, human beings become truly capable of reading the world, and in turn, able to intervene in such ways as to effect positive change. (Freire, 1994, p.xi)

### **Perspective of One Student**

Two months after observing this lesson, I returned and interviewed some students. One of the students, Zefa (pseudonym), was among many who spontaneously remembered their first lesson. Here is what she adds to our understanding of this program from the perspective of one participant:

Zefa: The first homework was to get a birth certificate to learn more about myself...that's where you can find your full name, where you were born, your birthday, and a lot of other stuff. I learned about my history. When I went to school before, I didn't learn about my history. I learned about the history of where I live. It's better now.

Mariana: Does your teacher teach like elementary school teachers?

Zefa: I don't know. I don't think so. But I like her very much. She doesn't make us read stuff that we are not interested in. We learn how to read and write and we learn how to do other stuff. She helps us to do better outside of school.

Mariana: How?

Zefa: She helps us learn how to make a phone call, how to find information we need, how to get registered to work. Because if you don't get registered you don't get retirement. We talk about our rights and we talk about our duties. We learn more about who we are and our situations.

Zefa's perspective adds to the importance of rethinking the definition and teaching of literacy. She values the connections of learning to read and write the word as applied to reading and writing the world, engaging in personal and social change.



## Challenge

In today's world, we teachers must strive to reconceptualize our definitions of literacies and our approaches to teaching literacy. According to James Gee (1996) literacy needs to be couched in terms of acquiring a secondary Discourse. He defined Discourse as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (Gee, 1996, p.127). According to this definition of literacy, it is impossible to ignore the social ramifications of literacy, and it is imperative that we recognize how "reading the world," as in the reading of historical locations for students in this program, underpins "reading the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1997). We educators must strive to value the knowledge students bring to the classroom and promote the reading and writing of words as a tool to read and (re)write our worlds.

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