Engaging with Critical Literacy: Reflections on Teaching and Learning

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I'd love to incorporate a critical literacy perspective into my class. I realize that up until now it's been my view that has dominated what we read and what counts as the right answer. I've been so focused on students obtaining the right answer, my answer, I never thought about the messages my actions were sending. But how can I change what I do? I wouldn't know where to begin.—April

As teacher educators we agree with April that incorporating a critical literacy approach in English education is important but challenging. But before we go any further, we have a confession to make. Although we work to implement a critical literacy practice within our university classes, we don't always know what we're doing. We have found that applying critical literacy to classrooms has lots of ups and downs. There are days when we struggle to start and sustain discussions. Then there are days where discussions are vibrant and seem effortless; all the pieces seem to fit together, the class is buzzing with anticipation, and new ideas are being presented and examined. When things go well, our students co-construct new understandings and question beliefs through critical dialogue around the texts we choose, and when they don't go so well, we learn from those experiences and move on.

Because we make it clear that we are implementing a critical literacy approach to our instruction, we find that teachers will ask what they can do to launch this practice in their own classrooms. Many express that they want their students to move beyond regurgitating facts and ideas, and begin to use texts to understand their world in transformative ways. A favorite quote that we share in our classes is that critical literacy “equips students to engage in a dialogue with texts and society instead of silently consuming other people's words” (Christensen 393). We are upfront about our goals and objectives while also providing a candid look at some of the challenges we face as we continue to examine our practice.

Beginning a critical literacy practice is a “broad charge with almost no clear beginning” (Hall and Piazza 39). And while we do have some ideas about how to go about it, we must also confess that much of what we have learned and have helped others learn is often a result of our fumbling around and trying to make sense out of the literature we read and the things we have experienced. We offer a set of lessons we have learned from our experiences and a few suggestions for others who intend to engage in critical literacy practice.

What about Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy provides a framework for helping students take greater control over their lives and can help to transform the world around them (Lobron and Selman). However, reaching this goal requires students (and teachers) to become more aware of the messages communicated within texts about who is privileged and who has been or continues to be oppressed (Stevens and Bean). Reading, writing, and other forms of communication are social and political acts that can be used to indoctrinate people or work toward creating societal change (Comber and Simpson; Lewis; Street).

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common for the curriculum to be centered on reading a particular set of texts or genres that are considered central to developing students’ literary knowledge (Burroughs and Smagorinsky). As students read these texts, the focus is often on identifying the theme, understanding literary elements, or learning the role of the text within a particular historical context. When students’ interactions with texts are restricted to recalling ideas and information, they may not consider the complex historical, social, and political messages being communicated (Alvermann; Luke).

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While engaging in a critical literacy practice is challenging, April’s comment highlights a tension many of us encounter as we embark down a new path. While we may want to change how our students read and interact with texts, there is no manual for making that transition. How do we change? What are some ideas for getting started? And, perhaps most importantly, how do we begin to understand, make explicit, and examine our assumptions and biases that likely influence our interactions with students around texts?

**Lesson One: Starting with Ourselves**

We believe that if we are going to ask students to use texts to better understand themselves and their worlds, then we must also take up this challenge. Reflecting on our experiences as white, middle-class females provides a lens into how we have and continue to develop a critical literacy stance while also acknowledging the many sociocultural influences on our own identities. These reflections help us to deconstruct how and why we select texts, structure our lessons, and promote discussions with students. This kind of self-examination is tough, but it helps us come to terms with how our individual actions influence the extent to which we are able to teach critically or whether our instruction becomes a vehicle for promoting the status quo.

I (Susan) would like to offer a critical reflection on a study I conducted with fourth-grade African American boys while I was teaching in a large urban university after-school program. I wanted to select texts that would help my students critically examine how characters were portrayed in literature and allow them to explore ideas of race, gender, and language. At the time I believed that students would experience higher levels of engagement and increased comprehension if they were provided texts that mirrored their social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Sanacore).

I found two texts that I believed related to the lives of my students: Three Wishes (Clifton) and Heroes (Mochizuki). I also identified two texts that featured white, middle-class characters and that did not, to my knowledge, reflect the background of the students: Enemy Pie (Munson) and The Best Friends Club (Winthrop).

Although I expected my students to be more engaged with the multicultural texts, I quickly found that they disliked reading them and rejected the male characters in both stories. Rather than identifying with the texts that represented African American characters, issues of discrimination, a version of dialect, or an urban setting, the boys felt these texts had little to offer because they presented boys engaging in behaviors they felt were unacceptable, such as crying or being friends with a girl. To my surprise, the boys overwhelmingly preferred the texts that featured white, middle-class characters. These books showed boys engaging in behaviors my students believed were appropriate, such as riding bikes, throwing water balloons at girls, and playing baseball. Rather than use any of these texts to explore concepts of race, gender, or language, the boys used them as a way to justify or reject the ideas of masculinity they already held.

In my eagerness to confirm what I thought I knew, I did not see my own bias that contributed to the “counter intuitive” findings (Piazza). It is true that readers identify with texts that represent them, but on their own terms, and certainly not based on race, class, or gender features alone. This helped me to learn how varied my students’ identities were. It also forced me to come to terms with my assumptions about how to engage students in a critical literacy practice through culturally responsive teaching.

As teachers, we are always at risk of not being able to see and understand issues from our students’ perspectives. I learned that choosing texts based on race, gender, and language was, at best, superficial and, at worst, based on socially constructed notions of race that put too much emphasis
on skin color and dialect and too little emphasis on the many different ways that individuals perceive themselves. Recognizing this flawed perception is no easy task, as it would have been much easier for me to ignore or to blame my students for their inability to engage with the texts as I wanted. Literacy instruction is indeed a social and political act, and our beliefs and lived experiences influence the choices we make. Our willingness to turn the lens on ourselves is ultimately what will create more space for critical literacy practices in English classrooms.

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Lesson Two: Learning about Our Students

As Susan’s narrative demonstrates, students come to school with specific ideas about how the world does or should operate. When we select texts that confront their beliefs about race, gender, or culture, they may respond by refusing to read further or argue that such ideas are not possible. In this section I (Leigh) offer a lesson learned through my experiences working with a secondary English teacher named Jenna. Here I share the importance of understanding our students beyond the school walls and giving them the opportunity to connect their everyday lives and interpretations of the events that encompass them to the texts they read in school.

Jenna, a ninth-grade English teacher, contacted me one day to discuss her experiences in trying to teach Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. Jenna wanted to use the novel to provide a historical context for understanding issues of race and as a vehicle for understanding what racism looks like in today’s society. However, she was immediately confronted by many students who believed racism was “a thing of the past” and who cited Barack Obama’s election as president as proof that “it doesn’t exist anymore.” Most of the students believed the text had no bearing on their personal lives.

While Jenna and I disagreed with her students, we decided to take their statement seriously. We worried that if Jenna tried to convince her students that it is still a prevalent part of our society, they would feel their ideas had been devalued and would not engage with the text or the discussions. Jenna suggested that perhaps her students needed to go beyond the classroom walls and gather varying perspectives on issues of race from their own communities. These perspectives could then serve as evidence to support or disconfirm their current understandings.

Inviting students to study racism within their lives requires teachers to guide students in their understandings of how, why, and where their ideas come from. Jenna approached this in several ways. First, she began by posing the question, “Does racism still exist in our society?” to her class for discussion. Students were asked to share their beliefs and the experiences that shaped them. At the end of the discussion, Jenna asked the students to write a short response that communicated where they stood on the issue. This opened a window into her students’ thinking.

Second, Jenna asked her students to take the question home to their communities and explore it with the people in their lives. Students were able to speak with family members, neighbors, and business owners to gain a broader perspective on the issue. When students returned, they shared what they had learned and talked about how the discussions with others both in and outside school had informed their thinking about the question.

These experiences pushed the students in their thinking about complex issues related to race and provided Jenna information about where they stood and why. By having students get responses from their communities, and seeing how others responded, Jenna now had a broader understanding of what had influenced her students’ preconceived notions. She could then use these discussions as a frame for helping the students continue to explore racism as they read the novel.

Jenna’s experiences required a shift in how she thought about crafting her instruction. Rather than tell students that racism exists and insist they buy into her belief, Jenna facilitated an authentic inquiry in her students’ communities, which ultimately framed their discussions and reading of the novel in ways that connected it to their lives.

Jenna’s story reinforced for me the power and importance of knowing our students beyond their academic abilities. Her experiences taught me that engaging in a critical literacy practice requires more than thinking about
the skills we teach and the themes or concepts that the curriculum guide says students should learn. If texts and curriculum are decentered from the lives of our students, then many may not see the relevance in engaging critically with the ideas they are presented. By putting the students’ beliefs and values front and center, Jenna taught me the importance of using texts as a way to support students’ evolving ideas and not as a set of ideas students must conform to.

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It’s Not about Finding the Answers

Our experiences lead us to believe that a critical literacy practice grows naturally out of the learning we do about ourselves and our students. Perhaps the most salient lesson we have learned is that as teachers, we can let students set the pace for how we will use texts to examine issues. Through listening to them, we can find the most authentic way to select texts and use them to look critically at issues such as race, gender, or any other social construct.

The answers to April’s questions about what to change and what to do come not from doing something to our students but from doing something with them. Ultimately, a critical literacy practice is a community practice and not a student-based activity that is occasionally used. When we are open enough to recognize and critique our own socially constructed beliefs, we can create spaces that allow students to truly express their ideas and not feel they must conform to ours. We also set an example for our students by showing them that understanding, reflecting, and redefining our beliefs is an ongoing, lifelong process that we will engage in alongside them. Thus engaging in a critical literacy practice truly becomes a community effort and is no longer about students attempting to identify the answers that exist in our heads.

Works Cited


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